A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR
THE REVITALIZATION OF CHURCHES

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A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR
THE REVITALIZATION OF CHURCHES

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To God, my Savior, you deserve every ounce of glory from my life.

To Becca, my love, your unending love and encouragement have been a constant support, and I love you more than you’ll ever know.

To Hudson, our son, your simple smile and adventurous spirit have brought such joy, and I pray you grow to love God and His church even more than I do.
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PREFACE

I am incredibly grateful for many people who played a significant role in this accomplishment. My wife, Becca, has provided endless support and encouragement. Numerous friends and mentors, especially Freddy T. Wyatt, Matt Pinckard, and Jeffery Harper, encouraged my pursuit in the most difficult seasons. I am very thankful for the time and effort Mike Cowan invested in reading and editing my work. Each member of my committee played a vital role in my personal, theological, and educational development. Dr. Adam Greenway provided very thorough and helpful guidance and critique. I am indebted to Dr. Gregg Allison for much of the ecclesiological framework within the following pages and for his invaluable theological insight and refinement. Finally, I could not have accomplished this without Dr. Timothy Beougher, my supervisor. His encouragement is a large part of the reason I began the endeavor in the first place. I am forever grateful for his willingness to do much more than merely provide academic guidance. Certainly, this dissertation bears the fruit of his labors beginning in my master’s level work.

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December 2017
Churches in North America are dying at a rapid pace, and according to George Barna, “The Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation. Unless a radical solution for the revival of the Christian church in the United States is adopted and implemented soon, the spiritual hunger of Americans will either go unmet or be satisfied by other faith groups.”¹ Various statistics have been exhibited concerning this deplorable situation over the past two decades. Win Arn exhibited that about 4,000 churches close their doors every year.² Lyle Schaller claims, “An average of fifty to sixty congregations in American Protestantism choose to dissolve every week.”³ As of 2007, this trend had continued as documented by Warren Bird, who cites that 3,500 churches close their doors each year.⁴ Recently, LifeWay Research estimated that 3,700 churches closed in 2014.⁵ Additionally, according to the NAMB annual report, "In an average year 1,000 churches disappear from the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention] database. Many of those churches are closing their doors


⁵Lisa Canon Green, “Study: New Churches Draw Those Who Previously Didn’t Attend,” Lifeway, December 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, http://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2015/12/08/study-new-churches-draw-those-who-previously-didnt-attend/. Green explains, “Estimates of the number of 2014 Protestant church starts and closures are based on unofficial reports LifeWay Research gathered from 34 denominations that represent 55 percent of U.S. Protestant churches. The pattern in this large sample was applied to the non-reporting and non-denominational groups to provide the overall estimate.”
forever.”\(^6\) While the research may vary from study to study, the consensus among researchers and lay observers alike is that churches in North America are closing their doors more rapidly than any other time in Western history.

**Purpose**

How can this rapid decline and death of churches be turned back in order that the presence of the church in North America would continue to shine brightly for generations to come? Countless solutions to the many obstacles that the church faces have been proposed. The church growth industry has exploded, and whole libraries could be stocked with the innumerable volumes on the subject.\(^7\) One of the major solutions proposed and pursued has been to plant new churches, and the good news is that church planting has truly taken off in recent years. Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird recently wrote, “The energy and enthusiasm about church planting in North America is at an unprecedented high.”\(^8\) Not only have individual churches reoriented toward church planting, but also whole networks of churches have formed for the sake of church planting. These networks, such as Acts 29, Sojourn Network, and Summit Network, have proliferated in recent years. In the last five years, the North American Mission Board realigned its ministries and operations with the purpose of church planting especially in urban settings through the Send North America Strategy. As a result of the growing vision for and emphasis upon church planting in North America, the number of new churches planted each year (4,000) has grown to exceed the number of churches that close their

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In order to see churches throughout North America growing significantly again, the church’s response must be holistic including both planting and revitalizing churches. Unfortunately, while a compelling biblical case has been made for the importance of church planting, and the results have been very positive, a compelling biblical and theological case for the importance of intentionally investing in dying churches has yet to be clearly presented. Certainly, one should be encouraged that in recent years the particular work of church revitalization has begun to receive increasing attention. Many of these works are biblical and insightful. Yet even with a growing biblical methodology, a significant tragedy is that few, if any, of these works address the underlying foundation for why this ministry must be pursued, and as a result, a compelling vision for men to devote their lives to this vital ministry is lacking. Even when men have an instinct to care for established and dying churches, apart from a compelling biblical and theological vision, the frustrations, disillusionment, and other obstacles in revitalization ministry lead many to move on, burnout, or quit altogether.

Answering the question of why and cultivating a clear vision are essential driving forces behind any movement, for as James K. A. Smith argues, “Action and creative cultural labor are generated more by visions than maxims, more by a telos than a rule. This intuition is captured in a saying attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of The Little Prince: ‘If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless

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10See Harry L. Reeder III, From Embers to a Flame and a revitalization coaching ministry called Fanning the Flame at http://www.emberstoafame.org/fanning-the-flame.html; Andrew M. Davis, Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again; Mark Clifton, Reclaiming Glory: Creating a Gospel Legacy Throughout North America; Ed Stetzer, Comeback Churches; Aubrey Malphurs, Re:Vision; Gary McIntosh, There's Hope for Your Church; Brian Croft, Biblical Church Revitalization; Bill Henard, Can These Bones Live? Michael F. Ross, Preaching for Revitalization; Tom Cheyney, Renovate Conference at www.renovateconference.org.
immensity of the sea.” Vision clarifies, directs and inspires, and as Simon Sinek asserts in his work on the importance of why, vision—and specifically inspiration—creates leaders who “are willing to pay a premium or endure inconvenience, even personal suffering . . . [and] create a following of people—supporters, voters, customers, workers — who act for the good of the whole not because they have to, but because they want to.” Only with a clear, compelling biblical and theological vision will we see a movement of men devoting their lives to this ministry, willing to endure the inevitable suffering, and capable of leading congregations to thrive once again.

Thus, in order to answer the question of “why,” I am seeking to produce a theological vision for church revitalization. In my studies, I have come across a growing amount of works on how to approach revitalization, yet the question of why is typically assumed and certainly not addressed at length. Alan J. Roxburgh addresses this problem in church growth materials: "Such tools are important resources, but they can become false substitutes for forming a missional identity. Often missing from their application is reflection on the nature of the church. As leaders seek to address this complex situation, the tools and resources offered to them generally assume but rarely reflect on the nature of the church.” Similarly, church revitalization materials focus on strategies and processes but are missing an essential vision for why based upon the nature of the church. In light of that, I want to establish a biblical and theological argument primarily based on the nature of the church for why church revitalization is an urgent and necessary ministry, and from that foundational vision draw implications for methodology in pursuing revitalization.

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The ministry of church revitalization is necessary and important for a variety of reasons grounded in the very nature of the church itself. God has created the church with purpose driven identities that are grounded in her relationship with three communities: the Trinity, local church membership, and the world. Essentially, churches are communities of people who are worshipers of God centered on Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, family with one another, and missionaries to the world. The argument will be made that the nature of these relationships should propel God’s people to pursue the revitalization of dying churches. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to present a compelling case for why church revitalization must be pursued and a vision of how this should be pursued in light of the inherent relationships that local churches have with God, among their church members, and with the world. In order to accomplish this goal, several research questions will be addressed. This dissertation will seek to answer one primary question: why should the revitalization of local churches be intentionally pursued? Three additional questions will be addressed. First, why will church revitalization always be a necessary ministry? Second, does a church reach a point in which revitalization should not be pursued, and if so, when is that the case? Third, what are the methodological implications of the reasons for revitalization? The goal is that in answering these questions a compelling vision for revitalization will be articulated that contributes to raising up a generation of leaders committed to this particular ministry.

Background

My captivation with church revitalization finds its roots in my experience in churches growing up. Having pastors who truly loved the bride of Christ, I developed a love and passion for seeing the church grow through evangelism and discipleship. As I grew close with my youth minister during my final years of high school, I began to be exposed to a significant degree of unhealthiness in my church at the time. Unlike many people I knew who allowed the messy side of the local church to cultivate cynicism, God
actually began to develop a passion in me for healing the wounds and bridging the gaps between people within the church. Unfortunately, the unhealthy aspects of the church eventually led to the resignation of my youth pastor and a very messy situation. The youth ministry was at a moment of crisis, and having a significant leadership role as a recently graduated senior, I was compelled to step up, lead, and point people to Christ and the Gospel for the sake of the body. Though I held this role only for a short time as I was heading to college in the fall, I was marked by the pain that the church experienced and the destruction of that church’s witness in our small town. Never again did I want to see a church experience such things because of a tolerance of sin and immaturity within the congregation. Less than two years after that incident, I watched from afar as my home church split. One half of the body left and decided to start a new church just a few miles away. As I processed this situation, I vividly remember looking at the local newspaper in which a listing of churches was posted. To my amazement and chagrin, I counted over thirty different Baptist churches, and I could not help but wonder if a new church plant was really what our town needed, especially as the result of a split. My heart was broken for the state of the churches in my hometown, and as I widened my perspective in the years that followed, God gripped my heart with a passion to revitalize churches as a result.

To this day, I have continued to be captivated by the thoughts of what a movement of revitalization would mean for the state of the church in North America. As can be seen throughout the New Testament, God receives tremendous glory when individuals are redeemed and transformed by the gospel. In light of that truth, I could not help but imagine how much greater God would be glorified when an entire people repent, return to Him, and experience revitalization as a church. When churches that are declining due to sin and lacking a faithful witness are revitalized through the gospel to new health and growth, certainly, the power of that gospel is on display for all to see, and the God of that gospel is magnified. This line of thought pressed me to consider how
revitalization can best be pursued.

While this passion was continuing to develop, God led me to New York City to work with a church plant, and through that time, I was able to see the incredible movement of God across North America through the multiplication of church plants and church planting networks. Yet my encounter with this movement actually further led me to commit myself to revitalization. By no means do I view revitalization as better than or preferable over church planting as a whole, but as church planting has taken off in recent years, I can’t help but wonder how great a movement would be created in North America if a similar emphasis would be laid upon church revitalization.

Thankfully, a renewed emphasis upon church revitalization has been on the rise as of late. With ministries such as Mark Dever’s 9 Marks, Harry Reeder’s Embers to a Flame Conference and Fanning the Flame Ministry, and Tom Cheyney’s Renovate, a growing base of literature is developing for the specific work of church revitalization. Through my studies in the doctoral program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I have encountered a great deal of this growing material, and while much of the material being produced is deeply biblical and sound, one of the primary missing pieces is the lack of a compelling vision for the pursuit of this ministry. The problems in churches across America are often cited, yet the reason for addressing these issues is often missing or merely addressed briefly.

In order to see a significant movement of revitalization, a host of ministers must be raised up who will passionately pursue the work of revitalization, and this will not come from mere intuition or assumptions about its necessity, but only from a clear, compelling, and biblical vision calling them to this task. Reeder gives one page to making his argument for church revitalization, which can be summed up in this one line: “The people of God need a biblical strategy for church revitalization because so many of us are
or will be part of a body that is in need of it.”14 While this observation is true, it lacks compelling vision and purpose. With the growing trend of lack of commitment among church members, why should members or ministers stay at a church in decline? Why not let the church die and take part in a new church plant that is actually seeing conversions and baptisms?

While not arguing against church revitalization, Tim Keller does argue for church planting based upon its effectiveness: “Dozens of denominational studies have confirmed that the average new church gains most of its new members (60-80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over ten to fifteen years of age gain 80-90 percent of new members by transfer from other congregations.”15 Certainly, as ministers are committed to reaching the lost, this makes a compelling argument for the pursuit of church planting, and the rest of Keller’s argument fills out a holistic vision for the purpose of planting. This kind of vision is lacking in church revitalization material, however. Instead, as Reeder assumes the desire to revitalize because the need is present, Bill Henard does the same as well in his recent work: “Do churches die? Of course they do. That issue offers the primary motivation for this book. Should churches die? If we believe that the church belongs to Jesus, then to offer an answer in the affirmative becomes a much more difficult conclusion. Therefore, I start with this presumption: God wants the church to grow.”16 Unfortunately, due to the cynicism toward institutions in general and declining established churches more specifically, this presumption seems tenuous. Thus, the goal in developing this dissertation is to fill that void and provide a compelling vision for revitalization.


Methodology

In order to establish a theological vision for church revitalization, this dissertation will articulate a foundational ecclesiological ontology and draw connections between the identity of the church and the call to church revitalization. This method is based upon the ecclesiological approach of Gregg Allison in *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*. According to Allison, three primary approaches have been taken to ecclesiology: functional, teleological, and ontological. The functional approach articulates what the church is based upon what it does. The teleological approach begins with the purposes of the church, and the ontological approach, Allison’s approach as well, explains the church through identifying the characteristics (some of which have a “directionality” or telos as Allison describes them) that make up her being with the purposes and functions that flow from these.\(^{17}\)

While there is value in each of these approaches, the ecclesiology developed in this dissertation makes a minor shift in the above perspectives. Rather than distinguishing a teleological and ontological approach, this dissertation will combine elements of both by studying the church as a teleologically driven being in order to provide the clearest possible picture of who the church is. As in Allison’s ecclesiology, the basic teleological ontology of the church is the source from which its functions and ministries proceed, and as will be established, church revitalization is one of the ministries that necessarily emerges from these sources. Thus each of the first three chapters after the introduction will establish an aspect of the being of the church and follow that with reasons for revitalization. Next, the ongoing necessity of revitalization will be established through a biblical survey of spiritual renewal among God’s people. The survey will also examine the reality of spiritual warfare as it relates to the church’s need for renewal. Lastly, despite the biblical reasons to pursue revitalization, is there a time when one should stop

seeking revitalization, and if so, when? In light of the nature of the church, the final major chapter will consider these questions as well as the methodological implications for the revitalization of local churches.

My hermeneutical and theological approach has a significant impact on the methodology and definitions utilized throughout, thus both must be addressed in turn. Both of these approaches pertain to the continuity and discontinuity of the Old and New Testaments and in light of that national Israel and the church. Allison delineates four major approaches to the issue at hand: “absolute continuity,” “moderate continuity,” “moderate discontinuity,” and “absolute discontinuity.” On either end of the spectrum, both positions proceed too far to the extremes as the law is either wholly continued or entirely dismissed. Both extremes are ultimately untenable. As a result, I have adopted a mediating position, specifically moderate discontinuity. Two significant hermeneutical principles ground my approach and influence my theological perspective. One primary hermeneutical principle is, as Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum articulate in *Kingdom through Covenant*, to begin with any passage on the “textual” level and consider what the passage meant in that immediate context, then move to the “epochal” level and consider what the passage meant at that point in redemptive history, and finally, move to the “canonical” level to consider what this passage means in light of God’s total revelation in both the Old and New Testament. This approach is vital since God’s Word is progressive in its revelation of who He is and how He is redeeming all of mankind and creation. Many interpreters and theologians are too quick to read the New Testament into the Old and end up with a skewed perspective on the meaning of particular passages that have significant implications for the doctrine of the church. Approaching Scripture with the above principle and a historical-grammatical method of interpretation is vital for

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faithful hermeneutics and helps to avoid washing out some of the significant implications of what God was doing at a particular point in history.

Additionally, one’s approach to typology is important as well. The idea of typology is distinct from both analogies in which mere parallels can be drawn and direct-prophecies in which the change is plainly made. Walter Kaiser explains types in the following way: “Nevertheless, when God specially designated events, institutions, and persons, he did so because they had a certain necessity about them that pointed beyond their times to another future time and generation. Even though its future realization would exceed what the designees had experienced, enough would still be shared in common for later generations to know that the repeated situation, recurring office or ritual, or the reiterated principle was the same.”

Four important rules for typological hermeneutics are provided by W. Edward Glenny:

1. The Old Testament type must be based on “historical facts—persons, actions, events and institutions,” not hidden meanings found in the text.
2. The link between the type and the antitype must be identifiable in Scripture.
3. A pattern or correspondence must exists between the Old Testament type and the New Testament antitype.
4. There must be an escalation or heightening from the Old Testament type to the greater New Testament antitype.

As will be evidenced in following chapters, typology rightly understood points to significant continuity between the Old and New Testaments as well as Israel and the church. Yet, once again, Gentry and Wellum are helpful as they point out that the major types throughout the Old Testament, including that of Israel, find their primary fulfillment in Christ, and as a result, while there is significant continuity between the church and Israel, discontinuity does exist. In part, recognizing the progressive aspect of revelation and the realities of typology leads to a perspective that affirms moderate

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22Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant, 121-26.
discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Essentially, while there is one unified plan for redemption across the ages through the work of Jesus, discontinuity does exist and must be recognized between the nature of the church and Israel, specifically ethnic Israel’s future.

With the above principles in view, I operate with a moderate discontinuity perspective primarily due to four issues. First, the interpretation of two particular passages are significant. Romans 11 is a key passage in the debate in which I affirm some degree of future fulfillment for believing ethnic Israel. Also, Galatians 6:16 is often cited as a clear equation of Israel and the church. However, Robert L. Saucy rightly points out that the evidence is in favor of understanding Paul as referring to two different entities within the verse, for the contextual evidence favors “the usual copulative (i.e., ‘and’)” translation and “perhaps most importantly, if ‘the Israel of God’ is a reference to the church, it would be the only instance where the apostle uses Israel with this meaning.” Second, the degree of discontinuity between Israel and the church is evidenced in the sharp transition at the day of Pentecost leading to the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit and the ingathering of the nations. Third, while baptism and circumcision share some similarities, my affirmation of believer’s baptism results in a significant degree of discontinuity. Finally, my perspective on prophecy aligns with the discontinuity perspective as Allison explains:

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23The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning national Israel have not all been fulfilled in the church, and at the least, Romans 11 affirms a fulfillment for Israel in a future large-scale conversion. Allison argues, “Furthermore, the church has not replaced Israel nor fulfilled all of the promises made to Israel, and given the Old Testament promises (affirmed in Romans 11) of a bright future for the Jews, a significant divine work awaits them, including their large-scale conversion and national restoration.” Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 2069-2071.


26While physical circumcision was applied to every physical member of the nation of Israel, baptism is reserved for those who have personally repented and believed the gospel.
Some prophecies (e.g., Isaiah 53) addressed the coming of the Messiah and have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (or will be fulfilled at his second coming); some have been forfeited by the Jews because of their refusal to recognize Jesus to be the Christ; and still others are now being partially fulfilled in the church (e.g., Jer. 31: 31– 34 with Heb. 8: 8– 13; Joel 2: 28– 32 with Acts 2: 17– 21). Furthermore, and in contrast to these elements of Old Testament revelation, the discontinuity approach holds that the promises and prophecies of a national restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land of Israel (e.g., Deut. 30: 1– 10; Isa. 49: 8– 26; Zechariah 10) await a literal (physical) fulfillment in the future (as evidenced by Romans 11).27

The distinguishing factor here is that some of the prophecies have not been totally fulfilled in the church and will one day be fulfilled in some manner with Israel.

While these issues highlight my moderate discontinuity perspective, a remarkable amount of continuity does exist between the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. Despite the distinctions, I wholeheartedly agree with Saucy that “many aspects of Israel are applicable to the ‘people of God’ in the church. . . . Because of the basic continuity in the nature of God’s salvation and the consequent nature of the ‘people of God,’ many aspects of the earlier covenant people are likewise applicable to the covenant people of the NT church.”28 In light of all this, when properly interpreted through the textual, epochal, and canonical approach and with applicable typology, many principles applied to Israel are relevant for the church and, as a result, local churches. In fact, many of the perspectives and conclusions of the moderate continuity viewpoint are shared with various exceptions such as the future of ethnic Israel, the nature of church membership, and the ordinances. Ultimately, the typological fulfillment of God’s dealings with Israel and their spiritual history provide many insights and examples for churches’ relationships with God and their spiritual renewal.

Finally, in order to establish the arguments for this dissertation, a wide variety of sources will be utilized. The primary text for this dissertation will be the Bible, for the Scriptures are the authoritative, inerrant, and inspired Word of God and provide the only perfectly reliable source for who the church is meant to be. In addition to Scripture,

27 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 854-61.

28 Saucy, “Israel and the Church,” 248-49.
journal articles and books in the fields of ecclesiology and church revitalization will be considered. Commentaries will be utilized as specific passages are addressed. Additionally, biblical theologies of particular themes related to the church will be engaged, and systematic theologies will also be utilized for the development of ecclesiology.

**Definitions**

In order to provide clarity for the following discussion, several definitions are required. As the church is the focal point of this work, a specific definition must be established. Additionally, several distinct ideas can often be confused when dealing with the idea of church revitalization. In order to have clarity as to the kind of ministry that this dissertation is seeking to promote, one must differentiate among these terms: church growth, church health, church revitalization, revival, and awakening. While all of these are related on some level, distinctions must be drawn.

*The church.* In light of the above ecclesiological methodology, I define the church in the following paragraph as the community of God’s people who have experienced the saving grace of Jesus through repentance and faith in the gospel and baptism of the Holy Spirit. The church exists on two levels: universal and local. Very broadly, the universal church as the body of Christ can refer to the totality of the people of God, “all of the redeemed of all the ages,” at the end of time. More specifically, though, the universal church manifested at this stage in redemptive history addresses every regenerate believer in Jesus Christ from the day of Pentecost until His return at His second coming. The local church is the physical manifestation of the universal church through a particular people, place, and time. The local church exists for the glory of God as a display people through living as worshipers of God centered upon Jesus and

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empowered by the Holy Spirit, family with one another, and missionaries to the world. The church lives out this purpose submitting to the authority of Christ under the rule of the congregation, the leadership of pastors, and the service of deacons through gospel ministry that includes gathering regularly for the preaching of the Word and worship, observing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, living out the one another’s, conducting church discipline, praying together, proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers, and embodying the gospel for the good of the world while standing against the schemes of Satan.

The discipline of church growth. First, the idea of church growth is defined best by Thom Rainer in *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles*: “Church growth is that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline. True church growth takes place when ‘Great Commission’ disciples are added and are evidenced by responsible church membership.”31 As a discipline, church growth is a broad category of study concerning the numerical increase of true disciples, and while church revitalization would certainly be a contributor to church growth and has growth as an end, the two are distinct. Revitalization, as will be defined more thoroughly below, is the specific discipline and ministry of bringing growth and health to churches in decline.

The church health movement. Based upon that brief definition of revitalization, the church health movement must also be differentiated from revitalization. The church health movement, for which Mark Dever and 9 Marks ministries have been a significant driving force, focuses primarily on biblical faithfulness for the sake of growth in spiritual health rather than the typically sociological and pragmatic tendency of church growth with its focus upon numerical growth. Revitalization shares in the pursuit of church health but only from the perspective of churches in decline and also includes the goal of numerical growth in a similar way to the discipline of church growth. Both of these

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disciplines have much to contribute to revitalization work due to the overlap, yet they must remain distinct disciplines.

The ministry of church revitalization. In order to understand the urgency of the particular work of church revitalization, one must delineate the nature of this ministry in comparison to the typical work of pastors in established churches. If defined too broadly, church revitalization will become every pastor’s job who is not planting a church. For example, Brandon Conner, in his dissertation on church revitalization, argues for a biblical model of church revitalization. In his discussion, he asserts that much of Paul’s ministry was a “proactive approach to church revitalization.”^32 Thus Paul’s work to continue the growth of many New Testament churches is considered revitalization along with what Conner describes as a “reactive approach.”^33 The trouble with this understanding of revitalization is that every church has room for growth in many areas, and every pastor has the responsibility to continue to equip his people to be built up “to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . .” (Eph 4:13).^34 To define church revitalization as both proactive and reactive is unhelpful as it dilutes the specific call for this ministry that has many particular difficulties that are unique to revitalization.

Although in need of a minor tweak, Harry Reeder provides a much more helpful definition: “Leading a church that has plateaued of [sic] declined or lost effectiveness for the work of the kingdom back to vitality and effectiveness in serving Christ.”^35 This understanding of revitalization distinguishes the work from both planting and shepherding an already established yet generally healthy congregation. However,

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^33Ibid.

^34All Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

even this definition has a weakness that can dilute its specificity. Every church will experience moments or short seasons of impurity, disunity, or stagnancy, but that does not mean that every church will need the specific ministry of revitalization. A temporal qualification must be added to Reeder’s definition to make it complete. Certainly, no exact time frame exists, but a few short months of subtle decline does not constitute a need for revitalization. Nevertheless, a highly acute shift in health over a short period of time could legitimately call for revitalization. Additionally, Michael Ross provides a helpful contribution in defining church revitalization: “The process whereby a church is refocused on its mission of both evangelism and nurturing, and renewed in its efforts to minister to others so that numerical, spiritual and organizational growth occur and are sustained.”36 The specificity of his goal is particularly helpful and should be included in any definition. Thus church revitalization should be defined as an intensive process of leading a church that has experienced an extended season of or an acute shift toward impurity, disunity, or stagnancy to significantly greater alignment with the true nature of the church as set forth in Scripture so that growth begins and continues.

**Revival.** Church revitalization must be distinguished from revival, which is a special outpouring of the Spirit of God. Ross explains that revitalization and revival are not the same thing by making a distinction that is primarily about degree. For extraordinary works of revival to occur, it must be something the Spirit initiates, but revitalization is something that can be worked toward, not without the Spirit, but apart from a special outpouring of the Spirit. He later observes that one can have revitalization without revival but not revival without revitalization.37

**Awakening.** Additionally, awakening and revival are not the same thing. Awakening is an incredible work of God that is brought about through revival. While

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37Ibid., 24.
revival focuses upon the renewal of the church, awakening is the widespread effects that flow from a renewed people of God. Specifically, awakening entails a mass ingathering of the lost into the kingdom of God. Further, it typically involves significant social ramifications for society as a whole. One should note that awakening does not always occur when revival does. While the church may be renewed in a marvelous way, the greater society may not be changed due to their hardness of heart or other significant factors. While a significant movement of church revitalization may be part of the Spirit’s work to bring holistic revival and a resultant awakening, these ideas should not be conflated.

Limitations and Delimitations

This dissertation will be delimited in scope in its argument for revitalization to the biblical and theological formulations of the nature of the church. While other avenues of research could be explored for establishing the necessity and priority of this ministry, the identity of the church as asserted in Scripture and affirmed in church history should be the primary influence on the direction of the ministries pursued in relation to it. In other words, as Allison argues for in his ecclesiology, the ontology of the church should lead to the functionality of the church. Additionally, every passage in relation to the identity of the church cannot be addressed. Thus, the focus will be upon passages that contribute to the primary images and themes of the church’s identity. Finally, this work will be limited by the small number of works specifically addressing church revitalization. This contributes to the decision to make synthesizing the biblical evidence and systematic theology concerning the church the primary methodological strategy.

Overview

Following this introduction, the first section of the dissertation includes three chapters on the call to revitalization based upon the nature of the church and her

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38 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 1037-65.
teleological identities. The second chapter focuses upon the church as worshipers of God. The biblical and theological foundation for this identity is delineated, connected to the Nicene Creed’s description of the church as holy, and developed in connection to its relationship with the Trinity in which churches are centered on Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. Focusing on the doxological and logocentric natures of the church as foundational, special consideration is given to Jesus as the Chief Shepherd and Bridegroom. Flowing from this foundation, reasons for revitalization are established: the goal of Christlikeness, the purpose of the worship gathering and undershepherds, and the call to pursue holiness in the bride of Christ.

The third chapter focuses upon the church as family with one another. The biblical and theological foundation for this identity is delineated, connected to the Nicene Creed description of the church as one, and developed in connection to covenantal relationship between church members and the implications of the one another commands. Flowing from this foundation, reasons for revitalization are established: the goal of oneness, the purpose of the worship gathering and church membership, and the call to value the entire body of Christ.

The fourth chapter focuses upon the church as missionaries to the world. The biblical and theological foundation for this identity is delineated, connected to the Nicene Creed description of the church as catholic and apostolic, and developed in connection to the images of the church as the new creation, salt, and light as well as its mission given by Christ. Flowing from this foundation, reasons for revitalization are established: the goal of witness, the purpose of the worship gathering and disciple-making, and the call to steward its witness and resources well for the sake of mission.

Next, the fifth chapter explores the vital nature of revitalization ministry through a biblical survey that establishes its ongoing necessity thus answering the first secondary research question: why will church revitalization always be a necessary ministry? For, understanding the ongoing need establishes the urgency to hear and
respond to the call. This chapter begins with an examination of the nature of renewal in
the Old Testament and Paul’s ministry of revitalization. Following this survey, the chapter
turns toward the reality of spiritual warfare and its impact on the need for revitalization.
Through an overview of the book of Revelation, the cosmic reality of spiritual warfare in
the church age is established and connected clearly to the reason for decline in local
churches. In the context of spiritual warfare, Jesus’ call for revitalization to several
churches in the introductory letters is examined to establish not only the ongoing need for
revitalization, but also the foundational path for pursuing revitalization.

The final chapter provides a summary of the argument for pursuing
revitalization and conclusions that answer the other secondary research questions. After
the summary, the next secondary research question is considered: when should a church
be left to die? Based upon the above study, illegitimate and legitimate reasons for giving
up on revitalization are identified. The chapter concludes with foundational methods for
the pursuit of revitalization ministry, thus answering the final secondary research
question: what are the methodological implications of the reasons for revitalization?

In the following pages, a compelling call for the revitalization of churches will
flow from the nature of the church and the pages of Scripture. Perhaps no greater single
argument can be made than from the nature of the church as worshipers of God. To that
ecclesiological identity, we now turn.
CHAPTER 2
WORSHIPERS OF GOD

Death is approaching thousands of churches in North America each year, and church revitalization is needed desperately if many of these churches will survive until the next calendar year. Many pastors and lay people long to experience a turnaround with growth and revitalization in these churches. But what motivates these ministers and church members? The better question is what should be their motivation? Love for the church or one’s particular church is certainly important, but motivation cannot lie primarily here. The center of motivation for revitalization must be God Himself. Recognizing this reality will not only provide significant implications for approaching revitalization, but also motivation for ministers and lay people to pursue revitalization of churches with purpose, passion, and perseverance.

While the nature of the church is the foundation for my argument, the Trinity is central because the church’s identity is established in God. Edmund Clowney expresses the centrality of the Trinity well in the following:

Indeed, the doctrine of the church is not only closely related to the doctrine of the Trinity, it flows from it. . . . The focus of Scripture is on the living God, of whom, through whom, and unto whom are all things, not least the people he has redeemed and claimed as his own. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Biblical doctrine of the church is directly related to God’s revelation of himself. As we trace the history of redemption recorded in the Word of God, we find that the church comes into view as the people of God, the disciples of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.1 Furthermore, Clowney maintains, “the people gain their identity from the self-identification of the Lord.”2 Thus, a clear understanding of the church’s relationship with

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2Ibid., 18.
God is vital for proper motivation and vision for revitalization. Additionally, the identity that the church receives from God carries with it core characteristics that have been recognized since the early church. The Nicene Creed identifies four core characteristics: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Reformers affirm the importance of these marks, too. Paul D. L. Avis argues, “If the Reformers were asked what they made of the credal marks of the church—unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity—they would answer with the whole Christian tradition that these are the essential notes or characteristics of the church.” Thus, throughout this chapter, the centrality of the Trinity for the motivation and vision of revitalization will be made manifest, and the relationship with each person of the Trinity will be discussed in connection with the relevant creedal marks of the church in order to establish the foundational reasons for revitalization. Ultimately, one will find that the central reason for pursuing the revitalization of churches is rooted in the church’s relationship with the Trinity as worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit.

In order to establish this argument, the church’s identity as worshipers of God will be developed through the examination of the church as part of the people of God as seen throughout Scripture. Particular attention given to 1 Peter 2 as well as images of the church developed elsewhere. Then, I will argue for the “doxological” nature of the church as the foundation of the church’s identity as worshipers of God and connect this identity to the creedal mark of holiness. After establishing the foundational identity, the connection to the other two persons of the Trinity will be developed. The “logocentricity” of the church will be expressed in connection with the creedal mark of apostolicity. Next, I will develop the essential relationship between the Spirit and the church’s identity as worshipers of God, and finally, reasons for revitalization will be

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5Ibid., loc. 2717.
expressed based upon this identity of the church.

**Worshipers of God**

One of the most prominent themes throughout the pages of Scripture is God’s work to make a people for Himself. J. Gary Millar in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* goes so far as to assert that “the message of the Bible, in essence, is that God is at work to bring into being a people under his rule in his place.” In the beginning, God is dwelling with the pinnacle of His creation in the Garden of Eden, but after sin enters the world, He casts humanity from His presence. Yet, God intends to be in relationship with humanity, thus He pursues a people for Himself. Beginning most prominently with Abram in Genesis 12, God works to create His people. One day, this work will culminate with the final restoration of all of God’s creation in which He will then dwell with His people forever (Rev 21:1-7). From beginning to end, God is creating one people for Himself.

Though the manifestation and structure of His people changes as redemptive history moves forward, the people of God in the nation of Israel and churches today are one people. Millar also argues for one people of God: “Ephesians 2 (especially vv. 14-16) makes perfectly clear that there is only one people of God, and that the new covenant community embraces all that has gone before, including both Jews and Gentiles on exactly the same basis. This is also reflected, as we have seen, in the way in which many of the OT pictures of the people of God are picked up and developed in the NT.”

Each stage of redemptive history revealed new facets of understanding concerning the people of God. Though much of the Old Testament exhibits the people of God as the

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nation of Israel and, as a result, reveals much about the nature of God’s people, a fuller understanding is expressed through the prophets, who “drew a distinction between the kin-group or political state and the real people of God—those who lived for God in faithfulness to his covenant (see e.g. Hos. 1:1-11)”

Through the prophets, the complex concept of remnant theology was developed. Millar explains, “At its heart, however, lay the conviction that even when Israel or Judah were at their worst, there was always a small group of faithful believers who held on to true religion (see e.g. Is. 11:11, 16; 28:5; 37:31-32; Mic. 4:7; 7:18; Amos 5:15; 9:12). . . . It was these people, the true people of God as it were, in whom God would work his eschatological resolution.”

Certainly, many benefits exist for those who were part of national Israel, but inclusion in the people of God is based not on citizenship in a political entity, but rather, on faith in God Himself. Not only is this basis for inclusion seen throughout the Old Testament, but it continues to be reinforced in the New Testament. Jesus makes clear that entrance into the kingdom of God is by faith, not citizenship or religious works. While the kingdom of God is not equatable to the people of God, George Eldon Ladd clearly articulates that those who are part of God’s kingdom form the community of God’s people.

The overarching continuity of God’s people throughout Scripture will continue to be exhibited as it provides a treasure trove of images to examine for the purpose of understanding the relationship between God and His church—the current manifestation of His people in the world. Many images applied to both the Old and New Testament people of God will be studied to delineate the nature, pattern, and intention of the church’s relationship with God. This relationship is of utmost importance in many arenas including revitalization. Paul Minear asserts, “Everywhere in the Bible we hear the

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10 Ibid.
assertion that the birth and survival of this people are due alone to God’s gracious and faithful action in creating, calling, sustaining, judging, and saving it.”

God’s relationship to His church and ultimately its visible form in individual churches informs the foundation for why revitalization must be pursued. For, through this study of images of God’s people throughout Scripture and especially in 1 Peter 2, one will find that the people of God are first and foremost worshipers of God, and this identity, above all else, informs the motivation and methodology for the pursuit of church revitalization.

The names and images of Israel in the Old Testament are numerous, and many of these are later applied to the church. Dever points to several—“God’s son (Exod. 4:22), his spouse (Ezek. 16:6-14), the apple of his eye (Deut. 32:10), his vine (Isa. 5:1-7; Nah. 2:2), his flock (Ezek. 34)”—and argues, “In each of these names, God foreshadows the work he will eventually do through Christ and his church.”

With this reality in view, Minear’s *Images of the Church in the New Testament* attempts to address each name or image given to the church, draw the appropriate connections with the Old Testament people of God, and express the implications for one’s understanding of the church. He explains that the images “all serve a double function: first, of linking the New Testament community intimately and strongly to the whole course of Israel’s history, and second, of emphasizing the awesome significance of being inside rather than outside this nation.”

Many of the images identified are rare or brief and are addressed in a broad overview. On the other hand, Minear spends an entire section detailing images that contribute to the overarching idea of the church as the people of God. Several of these images will now be examined individually while others will be considered later in a study of 1 Peter 2.

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13Dever, “The Church,” 768.
First, a clear family connection is drawn between the church and the Old Testament people of God. Abraham is the father of not only ethnic Israel, but also the church. He is “the father of us all” (Rom 4:16), and we are his “offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29). Yet, the church can look to more than Abraham as father. Paul calls those who experienced the Exodus “our fathers” as well (1 Cor 10:1-5). These images communicate a couple of important ideas according to Minear. First, the God of the patriarchs, the nation of Israel, and of the entire Old Testament is the same God of the church, which is seen clearly in texts such as Acts 3:13; 5:30; 7:32; 22:14. Additionally, Minear argues that the language of twelve tribes seen in James 1:1 and Acts 26:7 “asserts the oneness, the fullness, and the wholeness of the people of God.” While the attribution of the twelve tribes language seems to go too far considering the recipients seem to be ethnic Jews, the assertion of the unity and comprehensiveness of God’s people is certainly garnered from the familial ties expressed previously. In light of these ideas, a complete understanding of the church can only be developed in relationship with the God of our fathers and in the pattern of our fathers’ relationship with Him.

Second, the concept of circumcision is prominent in both the Old and New Testaments in close connection to the family ties drawn above. The religious rite was necessary to be part of the nation of Israel. Though clearly a physical act as laid out in its inception in Genesis 17:10, the main point of circumcision was identification with the people of God and a symbol of spiritual commitment to following Him (Deut 10:16). The New Testament authors build on this idea typically referring “not to the rite but to the people (Acts 10:45; 11:2; Rom 3:1, 30).” In Romans 2:25-29, one finds that ultimately circumcision is inward, not outward, and corresponding to that, inclusion in God’s people

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16Minear, *Images of the Church*, 73.
17Ibid.
18Ibid., 75.
19Ibid.
is inward, not outward. Further, in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, true circumcision is identified with those “who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). In light of this brief overview, one finds the defining physical rite of the nation of Israel being attributed to the church in a spiritual way consistent with the true meaning of circumcision. Thus, continuity is once again apparent with one specific aspect of discontinuity: no longer are the people of God defined physically or ethnically, but they are defined by their relationship with God through faith that leads to worship by the Spirit in Christ Jesus.

Next, the concept of God’s assembly is prominent in both testaments with significant emphasis upon the worship of God. Dever observes, “Etymologically, a connection exists between the Old Testament word for ‘assembly,’ qahal, and the New Testament word from which ‘church’ is translated—ekklesia.”  

Further, the Old Testament word for assembly “is closely bound up in the Old Testament with the Lord’s distinct people—Israel. The rich association between the assembly of God and the distinct people of God then carries over to the New Testament.”  

Once again, continuity between the people of God in each testament is clear, and a study of the concept of assembly is essential for a full understanding of the relationship between God and His people, specifically the church.

The assembling of God’s people begins at Mt. Sinai with the people receiving the law and learning how to properly worship and honor Him. Their journey to Mt. Sinai was for the purpose of worship as is seen in the declarations to Pharaoh that God’s people are to be released to go worship in the wilderness (Exod 3:18; 5:3, 8; 8:27; 10:25). Later in Deuteronomy 4:10, one finds a crucial purpose of the assembly: to meet with and properly orient their hearts to God as well as be equipped to share the Word of the Lord with others. Additionally, Clowney argues that the assembling of God’s people is where

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20Dever, “The Church,” 768.

21Ibid., 769.
they find their identity from the Lord, and the covenant renewal that takes place during the assembly is vital for the life of God’s people. Deuteronomy is the recounting of a covenant renewal assembly as a whole, but it is just one of many led by various leaders throughout the Old Testament: Joshua in Joshua 8:34-35, David in 1 Chronicles 28-29, Jehoshaphat, Joash, and Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 20, 23, 29-30, respectively.

In addition to these special assemblies, God provides for regular “festival assemblies: the Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. At this last feast every seventh year the law as to be read and the covenant renewed (Dt. 31:9-13).” In light of the theme of assembly, Clowney explains, “Israelites are a nation formed for worship, called to assemble in the courts of the Lord, and to praise together the name of the Most High.” Yet, the idea of assembly does not end in the Old Testament. Clowney maintains, “The prophets proclaimed a new assembly of the people of God. It would come in the glorious future when God would again manifest his presence. Isaiah pictures a great feast, spread on the mount of God, to which not only the remnant of Israel but also the remnant of the nations would be gathered in (Is. 2:2-4; 25:6-8; 49:22; 66:18-21; cf. Jer. 48:47; 49:6, 39).” The coming future assembly will incorporate both Jews and Gentiles.

In the New Testament, \textit{ekklesia} occurs 114 times with only five of those referring to gatherings other than Christian assemblies. Typically translated church, \textit{ekklesia} was utilized by Jesus not as a generic term for gathering, but instead, as a well-known term to describe the people of God (Matt 16:18; 18:17), and Dever explains that this specialized use can be clearly seen in the book of Hebrews: “The Greek equivalent of this phrase is used by the writer of Hebrews to describe the people of Israel with whom

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{Ibid.}Ibid., 19.
\bibitem{Ibid.}Ibid.
\bibitem{Ibid.}Ibid.
\bibitem{Dever}Dever, “The Church,” 771.
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Moses identifies himself instead of Pharaoh’s household (Heb 11:25). This same phrase had been used earlier (Heb 4:9) to refer to Christians.”27 Additionally, the church is birthed as an assembly. For Pentecost was the fulfillment of the ingathering of the harvest that was being celebrated in the OT festival, and now, the people of God are being gathered for worship. Clowney contends, “Peter preached the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. The Spirit had been poured out, the worship of the new age had been ushered in. The church, the assembly for worship, was praising God. . . . It is no accident that the New Testament church is formed by the coming of God the Spirit in the midst of an assembly gathered in praise. The church in any city is composed of those who ‘call upon the name of the Lord’ in that place (Acts 9:14; 1 Cor. 1:2).”28

Similar to the Old Testament people of God, the church is inherently an assembly with the purpose of worship and covenant renewal as the priorities of its gathering, thus the church manifests itself in visible local assemblies for these purposes (Heb 10:24-25). Clowney captures the implications of this concept clearly: “Reverent corporate worship, then, is not optional of the church of God. . . . Rather, it brings to expression the very being of the church. It manifests on earth the reality of the heavenly assembly. The glory of God is that to which and for which the church is called.”29 Indeed, as the author of Hebrews explains, we approach the heavenly assembly and gain an unshakeable kingdom, and in light of that, we must worship God (Heb 12:18-29). The very nature of churches as assemblies is as worshipers of God. While churches vary greatly in faithfulness to their intended nature, an assembly of worship is nonetheless their primary identity and purpose.

Lastly, the image of God’s people as His bride is not limited to the New Testament. The prophets often spoke of Israel as God’s wife. Hosea’s life forms an

29Ibid., 22.
allegory for God’s relationship with Israel in the form of a husband and wife relationship. Despite the unfaithfulness of His wife, God will pursue her and show her mercy. Elsewhere, Isaiah affirms this same concept (54:4-8), and God will one day rejoice over His bride (62:5). The Lord also compares Israel to a bride in Jeremiah 2:2. Jesus picks up on this image when He refers to Himself as the bridegroom in Mark 2:18-20. Paul utilizes the image in Ephesians 5:22-31 as he explains that human marriage points to a much greater reality: the relationship of Christ to His church. The emphasis in this passage is on the bride becoming holy, without blemish, through the sacrifice of the husband. Again, based upon 2 Corinthians 11:1ff., Minear states, “The apostle writes that he has betrothed the Corinthian community as a chaste virgin to Christ as her on husband. To be a pure bride requires on her part ‘sincere and pure devotion.’”

The church as the people of God are to relate to Him in holiness for His glory, which can be seen even clearer in Revelation. At the end of all things, the bride is clothed in purity as part of the worship and glorification of God at the marriage supper of the lamb (19:6-10), and then, as the new creation dawns, the church is described as both the holy city and the bride to emphasize the beauty and holiness that reflects God’s glory (21:2, 9-11). Eric Alexander asserts, “There will come a day when God will pull down the scaffolding of world history. Do you know what he will be pointing to when he says to the whole creation, ‘There is my masterpiece?’ He will be pointing to the church of Jesus Christ.” Holiness is an essential characteristic of God’s people for the sake of His glory and true worship.

A Study of 1 Peter 2:4-10

A full understanding of the church as the people of God in continuity with the Old Testament community of faith and as worshipers of God is incomplete apart from an

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intensive study of 1 Peter 2:4-10. This text provides several images applied to churches that inform not only a full understanding of their nature relating to God the Father, but also the centrality of their relationship with Jesus. The goal of this study is to give close examination to the images utilized within the passage, especially those of verses 9-10, that develop one’s understanding of the church and as a result, further build a case for the ministry of revitalization of local churches.

The overall structure of the text is best seen as W. Edward Glenny outlines: verses 4-10 are a unit in which verse 4 is a condensed version of verses 6-8, and verse 5 is a condensed version of verses 9-10. Peter begins with a focus on Jesus as rejected by men but chosen by God (v. 4), and the identity of the church is grounded in her relationship with the elect Christ (v. 5). After this explanation, Peter develops his point further by citing several Old Testament passages to express the vital nature of Jesus’ election and the church’s relationship with Him (vv. 6-8). Then, expanding on verse 5, Peter provides an extensive description of the church through several Old Testament allusions and images (vv. 9-10).

As Glenny argues, in 1 Peter 2:4-5 one finds the foundation for understanding verses 9-10 in which imagery connected with the OT people of God is so prevalent. Peter’s ecclesiological reflection (vv. 5, 9-10) is grounded in his understanding of Jesus (vv. 4, 6-8), who is “living,” “chosen,” “precious,” and the “cornerstone” in God’s building. Thus prior to addressing the images used for the church, a brief consideration of the passage’s Christology must be provided. The life of the church is grounded in Jesus’ life. He is the “living stone,” which according to Glenny, points not only to his resurrection, but also to his “life-giving nature.” In addition to His vitality, Jesus is

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33Ibid., 161.

34Ibid., 161-62.
chosen and precious before God despite His rejection by mankind. Simon Kistemaker argues for the importance of the contrast for understanding Jesus and His people:

Peter contrasts unbelieving people who have rejected Jesus, and continue to do so, with God for whom Jesus is elect and precious. Peter repeats the theme of election, for he calls the recipients of his epistle “God’s elect” (1:1) and “a chosen people” (2:9). Also, to his sermons recorded by Luke in Acts, Peter repeats the theme that Jesus is rejected by men but chosen by God (Acts 2:22–36; 3:13–15; 4:10–11; 10:39–42). . . . Conclusively, with Jesus the believers share in God’s electing love.35

The people of God are in relationship with Him and gain their identities through the electing love of God toward Christ. But how is this relationship formed? How does the church experience this life as God’s elect through Christ?

Peter expounds upon the relationship through three Old Testament citations (vv. 6-8).36 The connection between the stone and the people of God in the following verses is the fact that they are both chosen, and those within the chosen community are clearly those who believe. Peter points to the centrality of Christ again in his use of the image of Jesus as the cornerstone. Through alignment with the cornerstone, the people of God are made into a spiritual house, and this alignment comes through belief (v. 6). But those who do not believe will “stumble,” experiencing shame on the day of judgment rather than honor (vv. 7-8), which as Thomas R. Schreiner argues, means “final vindication on the day of judgment.”37 So, while those who are in relationship with Christ through belief experience life and the electing love of God, those who do not believe will experience the full judgment of God toward sin, and as Peter closes this section, he


36Glenny argues, “The hermeneutical classification that best describes the appropriation of the three stone quotations in 1 Peter 2:6-8 is typological-prophetic. It involves a divinely ordained and orchestrated historical correspondence (pattern) between a person, place, or event in the Old Testament and Christ the greater antitype in the New Testament. . . . The emphasis of the stone complex is not Christological, however, as are other stone complexes in the New Testament; rather, it is soteriological describing believers and unbelievers. . . . [Thus], Peter is now ready to develop further the identity of the believing community in verses 9-10, on the basis of their connection with the stone described in verses 6-8.” Glenny, “The Israelite Imagery,” 168.

clearly asserts their personal responsibility and God’s sovereignty over these events. Schreiner explains, “People who stumble and disobey are responsible for their refusal to trust in Christ, and yet God has appointed, without himself being morally responsible for the sin of unbelievers, that they will both disobey and stumble.”

God’s electing love toward Christ and His people is the foundation for understanding not only the centrality of Jesus, but also the identity of God’s people as worshipers as seen throughout the rest of this text.

Peter gives six significant images for the church that flesh out the identity of the church. He begins in verse five with “a spiritual house.” Though some translators argue that Peter is calling the church to make itself into a spiritual house, most argue as Schreiner that oikodomeisthe is not an imperative but an indicative, for he writes, “The passive of the verb, however, is never rendered as an imperative in its seven occurrences in the New Testament, and in the forty-eight uses in the Septuagint it is imperative only on two occasions (Ezra 6:3; Ps 50:20), and hence we should take it as an indicative here.”

This fact is important, for God’s building His people into a spiritual house further grounds their identity in Him and His work rather than their own. So, what is it that God is making? The image of a spiritual house is clearly alluding to the temple of God. Not only does Glenny argue for this idea, but Karen H. Jobes argues for it as well:

The Christian community is portrayed as a temple, implying that now it—not a literal stone building—is the place of God’s earthly dwelling by the Holy Spirit, a place of true worship and of acceptable sacrifice. This is a theocentric image, relating the Christian church to God, unlike the Pauline images of bride and body, which relate the church to Christ. The offerings made in the new temple are acceptable to God through Christ (2:5) but are nevertheless offerings made to God.

Thus, Peter’s reference concerning the church can only be fully understood through

38Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 111.
39Ibid., 106.
40Glenny, “The Israelite Imagery,” 162.
tracing the theme of the temple throughout Scripture.

Gregory K. Beale argues that the temple “was the unique place of God’s presence.” The core idea of the temple is God’s unique dwelling place with His people, but this theme does not begin simply with the building of Solomon’s temple or even the tabernacle. The biblical theme of temple can be traced back to the Garden of Eden. Beale contends, “Eden was the first temple.” Several aspects of Genesis 2-3 point to Eden as a temple. First, God is described as walking back and forth in the garden (Gen 3:8). Beale draws the connection between the words used to direct Adam, “work” and “keep,” and the words used to direct the priests, “serve” and “guard.” In Hebrew, they are the same words, and the angels take over this responsibility toward the garden after the fall, which is later represented on the ark of the covenant.

Additionally, Beale points to several other connections to the temple. The river flowing out of the Garden that is seen in later temple prophecies (Ezek 47:1-12; Rev 21:1-2) is connected to the possibility that Eden had a holy place. Beale asserts this possibility due to the parallels of the Garden’s water source with the future temple’s water source, which will flow from the holy place to the earth. He also connects the Garden and the temple based upon Ezekiel’s reference to Eden being the mountain of God and containing sanctuaries (Ezek 28:13-18). Finally, the temple concept is closely connected with the original goal for mankind and, as a result, the ongoing mission of the people of God. As image bearers, Adam and Eve were called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Beale argues, “The intention seems to be that Adam was to widen the boundaries of the Garden in ever increasing circles by extending the order of the garden sanctuary into the inhospitable outer spaces. The outward expansion would include the goal of spreading

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43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 7-8.

the glorious presence of God.” Both the glory of God as displayed in the image He gave to humanity and the presence of God were to be spread. This mission was passed on to the patriarchs as well (Gen 9:1, 6-7; 12:1-3; 22:17-18; 35:11-12; 47:27). Ultimately, this expansion of God’s glory and presence is finalized in the end (Rev 21-22). This missional aspect of the temple imagery that is applied to the church speaks not only to the identity of missionaries to be discussed in a later chapter, but also to the overall doxological orientation of the people of God. His people are worshipers because God’s original intent for mankind, which is then carried on through the temple theme, is to exist for His glory above all else.

Furthermore, the temple theme continues in the establishment of the tabernacle. God’s presence fills the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-38), and the same language is used to describe God’s presence in Eden as the tabernacle (Gen 3:8; Lev 26:12; Deut 23:14; 2 Sam 7:6-7). Further continuity is seen in that the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle as well as the temple each faced east, and in the temple, an atmosphere like that of a garden is cultivated through the decor (1 Kgs 6). Similar to the tabernacle, the physical temple built by Solomon also receives the presence of the Lord in a clear and powerful manner, and worship is once again closely associated with God’s presence and the temple (2 Chr 7:1-3). Neither the tabernacle, nor the temple, though, were end goals in and of themselves. Both point to the original and ultimate goal of God dwelling throughout His creation with His people (Isa 66:1). The various divisions of the temple pointed to this goal by symbolizing divisions of God’s creation: “The Holy of Holies represented the invisible heavenly dimension, the Holy Place represented the visible heavens, and the outer courtyard represented the visible sea and earth, where humans

46Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,” 11.

47Beale explains, “The same Hebrew verbal form (hithpael), hithallek, used for God’s ‘walking back and forth’ in the Garden (Gen. 3:8), also describes God’s presence in the tabernacle (Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14 [15]; 2 Sam. 7:6-7).” Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,” 7.

48Ibid., 8.
lived.” Numerous prophecies speak of the temple expanding to fill Jerusalem, Israel, and the entire earth. (Isa 4:4-6; 54:2-3, 11-12; Jer 3:16-17; Ezek 37:25-28; Dan 2:34-35, 44-45). The goal is clear: God’s unique presence with His worshiping people in all of His creation for the sake of His glory.

While a significant shift takes place, the theme of the temple continues in the New Testament first and foremost in the person of Jesus Christ. John’s Gospel begins by declaring that Jesus, who is God, “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1-14). The language John uses here actually points the reader back to the tabernacle. In Jesus, God was dwelling among us (see also, Col 1:19). Jesus even asserted Himself as the new temple, and through His life, death, and resurrection, He would change the way God dwelt among His people, no longer confined to a physical building (John 2:19).

But, the shift does not end with Jesus. Clowney explains, “Further, since God is present in Christ, and Christ is present among his people, they, too, become a dwelling for God. Christ, who promises to prepare a dwelling place for his disciples, promises also that both he and the Father will come and take up their dwelling with the disciple that loves him (Jn. 14:2, 23).” The church, both as individual Christians and as the assembly of God’s people, is now the temple of God. Paul explains that each Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), and the corporate body of believers is God’s dwelling place as well (2 Cor 6:16-7:1). The latter passage emphasizes the close connection of the church’s identity as God’s temple with holiness, one of the four primary marks of the church. The drastic shift in understanding the temple from a physical building to a spiritual reality in Jesus and His church is reinforced through the language of the New Testament.

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49Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,”, 16-17.
50Ibid., 19.
Testament authors. Minear explains:

Of the two Greek words for ‘temple,’ early Christian writers commonly chose to use *naos* rather than *hieron*, probably because they wanted to safeguard their conviction that God’s temple is something not made with hands (Acts 17:24). . . . Similarly, the use of the verb for tabernacling (*skenein*) stressed the definitive act of God in creating a temple: he created a temple by tabernacling with men, by dwelling in them and moving among them.⁵³

Additionally, Peter utilizes language to help in this shift in understanding, for Jobes argues, “If Peter meant to refer unambiguously to a holy building, he could have used either ναός (naos) or ἱερόν (hieron), words that can refer only to a religious building. The double meaning of oikos suggests a metonymy that allows an easy shift from the temple image to the community it houses, “a holy priesthood” (2:9) and “the people of God” (2:10).”⁵⁴ Further evidence of the church as God’s temple can be seen in the continuing of God’s mission through the church. Similar to Adam’s goal to expand the garden and thus the glory and presence of God to the world, so the church is to take the gospel to the whole world and accomplish the spread of God’s glory and presence in ever widening circles (Acts 1:8). Additionally, the church is a fulfillment of the temple as she bears the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:16-26). Once again, one finds language referencing back to the original temple in the Garden of Eden and the call to be fruitful and multiply.

Ultimately, the final stage of God’s redemptive plan is complete with the new creation in which God’s dwelling encompasses the whole earth (Rev 21:1-22:5): the new creation is God’s temple in its entirety. This reality is portrayed in the declaration that no temple existed in the new city because God is its temple (Rev 21:22). Also, Revelation 21:9-21 makes several allusions to various temple themes, such as, the Holy of Holies’ purity, golden covering, and cubic dimensions.

This examination of the temple is vital for understanding the church’s identity as Peter is portraying it. Several important emphases that will be repeated throughout the

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⁵⁴Jobes, *1 Peter*, 150.
rest of the passage have already risen to the forefront in this one image. First, the temple language indisputably ties the church’s identity to God Himself. Dever confirms, “Peter’s language of a temple. . . reminded these discouraged Christians that they were the people of God, the product of God’s gracious creation of them into an integrated reality—a single people. The people of God are based upon him and his act, deriving their identity from him uniquely.”

Second, God’s glory and its spread becomes the overarching purpose of the church. Local churches exist to not only gather in worship through song, but to encourage one another for the sake of worship as an entire lifestyle (Heb 10:24-25). God’s presence and glory is scattered as Christians scatter throughout their lives. Another important emphasis is the holiness of the church that is inextricably tied to her identity in God as worshipers. Jobes explains, “The primary attribute of a temple in first-century thought was its holiness. Just as God’s presence sanctified the temple of Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit sanctifies the Christian community, setting it apart as God’s own.”

Thus, the temple imagery used of the church by Peter points to her identity as holy worshipers of God.

The next image that Peter utilizes to describe the church is “a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices.” Priests have a special access to God that the rest of the people do not, yet just as the church’s temple identity is derivative, the identity of priesthood is also grounded in Jesus, the high priest (Heb 2:17-18; 4:14-16). The community of believers has a special access to God through Jesus Christ. This access is a glorious gift. John Calvin insists, “It is a singular honour, that God should not only consecrate us as a temple to himself, in which he dwells and is worshipped, but that he should also make us priests.”

Often called the priesthood of believers, each and every believer has access to God through Jesus, but this new relationship is not for the sake of

56Jobes, 1 Peter, 149.
our benefit alone. First and foremost, the relationship we have is for the purpose of worship: offering spiritual sacrifices. Closely tied to the holiness that characterizes the priesthood, the sacrifices are to be wholly devoted to God, but these sacrifices are certainly not the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament. For Jesus has brought those to an end. Yet, the author of Hebrews explains that our altar as priests is of a different nature as Minear defines in the following: “praise to God, doing good, sharing ‘what you have,’ and bearing abuse for him (Heb. 13:10-16). The uniqueness of his sacrifice rested in the opportunity and the demand for them to share in it with him, since he had so perfected their conscience that their sacrifice would be self-giving and not self-securing.”

Ultimately, the very purpose of the church being built as God’s temple was to create a community of priests capable of making sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:5). In other words, the church is the temple for the sake of worship as both a community and individuals. Thus, as the church, our primary identity is that we are worshipers of God.

Transitioning to verse nine, one should note from the very beginning that Peter is articulating who the people of God are. The present tense is an important distinction here in light of the text from which Peter draws much of his imagery. In Exodus 19:6, God declares that Israel “shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” While Israel will take on these identities, the church has the confidence of already bearing them, and this heightening is another way in which the continuity and typological fulfillment of God’s people is perceived between the nation of Israel and the church. Peter provides four primary images in verses nine through ten: “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.”

First, Peter returns to the importance of God’s election as the ground for His people’s identity. Minear points out that despite the normal use of "biological continuity,” race in this sense cannot be the point here since Peter is writing to a mixed audience.

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58 Minear, Images of the Church, 100.
Thus, “their racial identity is here determined by the fact of their election.”\textsuperscript{59} Rather than a physical distinction, Peter is pointing to the common ancestor and shared father in Abraham as discussed earlier. As A. T. Robertson states based upon 1 Peter 1:23, “The blood relation of the spiritual Israel (not the Jewish race) [is] through the new birth.”\textsuperscript{60} This reality is even more evident as one examines Isaiah 43:3 to which Peter alludes. Jobes explains the allusion clearly: “The phrase ‘a chosen race’ (γένος ἐκλεκτόν, genos eklekton) echoes Isa. 43:3, which announces that God himself is Israel’s only savior, who will deliver his people from their exile in Babylon. Peter frames his letter in the motif of the historic Babylonian exile in order to identify his readers with the OT promises of deliverance.”\textsuperscript{61} Peter is asserting the source of the church’s identity as the people of God: the electing love of God to save them and make them a people. Their identity is not grounded in anything they have done or have yet to do, but upon the electing grace and mercy of God.

Next, Peter returns to the image of the priesthood with an emphasis on its royal nature. While Glenny is correct that the primary focus of the priesthood image is worship rather than witness,\textsuperscript{62} other scholars rightly identify the missional nature of this image. Having already addressed the implications concerning worship, our focus will now turn toward the inherent idea of witness within this image. Millar acknowledges the difficulty of the image while affirming that Peter is clearly referring “to the way in which God has always been committed to reaching the world through his people (1 Pet. 2:9-10). A similar idea is present in Deuteronomy 4:5-8, where God’s people function as an evangelistic model for the nations.”\textsuperscript{63} The people of God bear His image and carry His

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59}Minear, \textit{Images of the Church}, 72.
\item \textsuperscript{61}Jobes, \textit{1 Peter}, 158.
\item \textsuperscript{62}Glenny, “The Israelite Imagery,” 171.
\item \textsuperscript{63}Millar, “The People of God,” 684.
\end{itemize}
presence throughout the world as mediators. Schreiner argues similarly: the church is to reflect God’s glory to the world as the nation of Israel was called to do so that the world would know who the true God and King is. Not only do they carry His character as a witness to the nations, but also as a royal priesthood, they are bearing the message of the King on His behalf and for the nations’ good. In addition to the missional aspect of the royal priesthood, the emphasis of witness to God’s glory for the good of the nations is clearly significant throughout the overall context as seen in the latter half of verse nine and verse twelve. While the missional nature of the church will be addressed in full in chapter four, witnessing to and reflecting God’s glory is also a vital aspect of understanding the church as worshipers of God and doxological by nature.

Third, the church is a holy nation. Once again, Peter emphasizes the holiness of God’s people. Based on the allusion to Exodus 19:5-6, Glenny argues that the church along with “the nation [of Israel] was to be set apart to God from all that was profane.” Peter is not arguing for a geo-political entity, but a people who are consecrated for God’s purposes. In the context that culminates with the people of God existing to “proclaim the excellencies of” God, the holiness of the church is a critical aspect of bearing witness to God and worshiping Him as He deserves.

As discussed earlier, one of the overarching themes of Scripture is that God is creating a people for Himself. No single description captures that more than the fourth and final image: “A people for His own possession.” The nation of Israel is called His “treasured possession” based upon the grace of God’s electing love (Deut 7:6-8). Peter is also likely referencing Malachi 3:17 in which they are a distinct people as they fear, esteem, and serve God, and in the same way, the church is to be distinctly God’s as well.

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64 Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 114.


Also, Schreiner explains that Peter is alluding to Isaiah 43:20-21.67 In that case, once again, one recognizes the purpose for which God creates His people. They are formed and possessed by God for the sake of glorifying Him. In light of the weight of the descriptions Peter uses, Schreiner concludes that “the privileges belonging to Israel now belong to the church of Jesus Christ. The church does not replace Israel, but it does fulfill the promises made to Israel; and all those, Jews and Gentiles, who belong to the true Israel are now part of the new people of God.”68 The continuity and purpose of God’s people continues to be seen as Peter makes clear reference to Hosea 1-2 in verse 10. According to C. H. Dodd, Hosea 1-2 is connected to our text in that it is “a description of the way in which God, of His sheer grace, adopted as His people those who formerly were no people of His—for Hosea, repentant Israel, for Christian teachers, the Gentiles.”69

The evidence in 1 Peter 2:4-10 is clear: God’s people are one people throughout time despite the differences between national Israel and the church. The church experiences the promises, benefits, and purposes of the true people of God throughout Scripture. Glenny asserts, “The point of Peter’s catenary of Old Testament references is that. . . they are the people of God, whose salvation and spiritual benefits under the new covenant follow a pattern established in God’s promised relationship with his chosen people, the nation of Israel.”70 Peter makes clear typological connections to prove the continuity among God’s people, and this typology is evident through the application of Glenny’s typological foundations discussed in the introduction. The typological fulfillment is seen in the Old Testament imagery due to the following reasons. First, as the basis of verses 9-10, verses 6-8 are fulfilled prophecy. Second, verses 9-10

67Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 115.
68Ibid.
70Glenny, “The Israelite Imagery,” 179.
are an escalation of two passages. Exodus 19:5-6 is no longer potential, but reality, and Isaiah 43:20-21 is now applied as spiritual rather than physical deliverance. Finally, Hosea 1-2 has been further fulfilled in the church.\(^71\)

Prior to moving on from 1 Peter 2, one final phrase must be addressed, for it decisively clarifies the purpose of the people of God as implied throughout the text and leads us to the next section concerning the doxological nature of the people of God. The identity of God’s people possesses an inherent teleology. The purpose for which God has created His people as Peter has described is His glory. The church exists to “proclaim [God’s] excellencies.” Peter establishes this purpose of God’s people as constant and continuing by alluding to Isaiah 43:21 in which God’s election and deliverance of His people is for the glory of His name. According to Robertson, the “excellencies” emphasize praise to God that magnifies His character.\(^72\) Clearly, then, His holiness and mercy are two aspects that must characterize the church considering the emphasis upon these two in the immediate passage. Yet, there is no need to limit to these characteristics alone, for the church is called to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in which a gamut of God’s characteristics shine forth (Gal 5:22-23). In the final main point of this passage, Peter clearly asserts the ultimate purpose of God’s people: declare the character of God to the world for the glory of God.

**The Doxological Nature of the Church**

As has been seen throughout 1 Peter 2:4-10, the church and, as a result, individual local churches exist with a summative identity of worshipers of God, and this identity carries with it a clear teleology: glorify God. As the first of his seven characteristics of the church, Allison identifies this purpose as the church’s “doxological” nature, or its orientation to God’s glory.\(^73\) An understanding of the doxological nature of

\(^{71}\)Glenny, “The Israelite Imagery,” 181-82.


\(^{73}\)Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, loc. 2641.
the church is grounded in the fact that all of creation is created toward this end. While certainly not the only purpose, Jonathan Edwards is correct in identifying God’s glory as the ultimate purpose of all of creation. This truth sounds forth throughout Scripture. Psalm 19:1 proclaims, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” More specifically, humanity’s purpose is to glorify God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with a question concerning man’s ultimate purpose. The answer is “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” First Corinthians 10:31 exhorts, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Glorifying God is the purpose for which man was created. Humanity is oriented toward God’s glory, that is, doxological. The Lord’s creation of mankind as His image bearers with the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:27-28) is a call to spread His glory throughout His creation by uniquely reflecting His character.

Allison writes, “In one sense, all that God has created is characterized by this doxological orientation.” But he uses this term to describe not only all of creation, but specifically the church, for he argues, “the proclamation of the excellencies of the God who has been merciful to it is the doxological raison-d’être of the church (1 Pet. 2: 9–10).” In other words, God’s glory is the very purpose of the church’s existence. Again, the doxological nature is seen very clearly in Ephesians 1 as Paul repeatedly describes the work of the Lord in saving His people for “the praise of his glory.” This purpose is rooted in not only God’s intention for creation, but also the end for which God created His people through all time.

Allison discusses the temple imagery as one way in which the doxological

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76Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 2641-43.

77Ibid., locs. 2671-72.
nature of the church is clearly seen. Minear argues that “the temple was the heavenly-earthly reality through which human community received its ultimate context in the glorification of God.” In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul connects the church to the temple. From this text and other temple passages in the New Testament, one finds that God manifests His presence and glory in His church today in a similar way to how He manifested it in the temple of the Old Testament. As discussed earlier, the dwelling place of the glory of God is the temple of God, which is now the church. Beale asserts that “our task as a church is to be God’s temple, so filled with his presence that we expand and fill the earth with that glorious presence until God finally accomplishes this goal completely at the end of time!” Thus, the church as temple is both a doxological and missional concept. The church is to expand that God’s glory might expand. The end of these aspects can be seen in Revelation 21:22-27 in which God’s glory is filling the new creation. Yet, the missional nature of the church is derivative of the doxological orientation. Gary McIntosh essentially argues this point when he writes, “The ultimate priority of the church is not its growth, per se, but the glory of God.”

Christopher Morgan further clarifies this purpose with one important addition:

As the image of God, Israel is called to embody his holiness, which is not only essential to their worship but also to their mission; they accurately reflect God to the nations only as they live in a way that resembles him (Deut 28: 9–10). . . . Because of Christ’s saving work and through our union with him, we as the church are now the image of God. We are the one new people, the new humanity, the people called to display God to the world, the new creation in the image of God, called to reflect Christ and embody God’s holiness (Eph 2: 14–16; 4:13, 24).

Morgan articulates a significant aspect of the church’s doxological nature: she is a

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79 Minear, *Images of the Church*, 98.
80 Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,” 31.
“display people.” Not only is the church intended to verbally declare praises for God as seen in 1 Peter 2:9, but she is also intended to reflect in her character and deeds the glory of who God is. As a display people, the church will communicate a message to the world about who God is. This reality is a vital component of a vision for church revitalization, for a message about God will necessarily be communicated to the watching world through the life of individual churches whether that message is accurate or not.

**Nicene Creed: Holy**

A consistent theme through the understanding of the church presented so far is holiness. The importance of holiness is explicitly established in the images Peter utilizes of a “holy priesthood” and “holy nation.” The imagery of the church as the bride, pure and undefiled, also builds the emphasis upon holiness. The church as God’s temple reinforces the holiness of the church as well, for Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 3:17, “For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” Additionally, in 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1, Paul makes a direct connection between the church as God’s dwelling place and the call to pursue holiness. The images that establish the church as worshipers of God clearly carry with them an emphasis upon the holiness of His people, and as a doxological people, the church is to display His holiness through being set apart from sin and in relationship with God.

The early church recognized this inherent characteristic when they articulated holiness as one of the primary marks of the church in the Nicene Creed. Theophilus emphasizes this mark, “God has given to the world which is driven and tempest-tossed by sins, assemblies—we mean holy churches—in which survive the doctrines of the truth.” The church is holy due to her unique relationship with God. Dever explains, “The church

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83 Morgan, “The Church and God’s Glory,” locs. 5165-76.

is holy and is to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:14-16). The holiness of the church describes both God’s declaration concerning his people and the Spirit’s progressive work. . . [in which] Christ’s holiness will be reflected.”

Thus, to understand what it means to be holy, one must consider God’s holiness first. Most definitions emphasize the idea of being separate. God is separate from His creation in the fact that He is high above our greatest thoughts. His holiness characterizes each of His other characteristics, such as His love and justice, in that they are distinct and immeasurably greater than any form of these ideas we can possibly manifest ourselves. Likely the most important aspect of God’s holiness is that He is separate from sin. Not only is He morally perfect and separated from anyone with sin, but He is also “Too pure to behold evil and unable to tolerate wrong” (Hab 1:12-13).

The church is not only made holy, but is also called to live holy lives in the current fallen world to reflect the moral purity of God. Ryken powerfully expresses this point through a series of New Testament references:

We have 'a holy calling’ (2 Tim. 1:9); we are ‘set apart as holy’ (2 Tim. 2:21); we were chosen to ‘be holy’ (Eph. 1:4); we are ‘God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved’ (Col. 3:12). The Bible identifies us as ‘a holy priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:5), ‘a holy nation’ (1 Peter 2:9), and a holy temple (1 Cor. 3:17; cf. Eph. 2:21). In fact, this is why Jesus died on the cross. It's so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy. . . ’ (Eph. 5:27; cf. Col. 1:22).

Yet, one must recognize, especially when examining the life of actual churches, that holiness is often lacking to say the least. While the church has her holiness secure, Jesus is working to bring His bride into that reality. As communities of redeemed sinners living in a fallen world, local churches have a long way to go in order to manifest complete holiness. For we recognize with the Reformers that we are simul justus et peccator.

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Calvin, for instance, explains our holiness in this way: “The Lord is daily at work in smoothing out wrinkles and cleansing spots. From this it follows that the church’s holiness is not yet complete. The church is holy, then, in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect.”

Additionally, though local churches should be on a trajectory of growth in holiness, expectations must be tempered. For, certainly, those who are truly God’s people within these communities will be advancing in holiness, yet Jesus makes clear in Matthew 13:24-30 that intermixed within our communities will be people who are not truly His. Many churches’ lack of holiness and, as a result, their impending death is certainly due in part to this reality. Nonetheless, churches are called to pursue holiness, for the presence of holiness or the lack thereof communicates a message about God and His character to the watching world. The church is called to spread God’s glory, and manifesting the holiness of God is an essential element of her doxological orientation.

The Church as Holy Worshipers for God’s Glory

In light of the evidence of Scripture, the church is primarily the community of holy worshipers of God for His glory. She was chosen by God’s electing grace and formed into a people—His people—in line with the eternal purpose for His people throughout history. The church is fulfilling the purpose of the temple in a greater way by displaying the glory of God, especially in her holiness, and spreading that witness throughout the world. She is to assemble for the sake of worship and to live daily lives that are characterized by sacrifices that bring glory to God. As doxological, her entire existence is intended to be oriented toward God’s glory, and holiness is to be one of the primary manifestations of this orientation. Individual local churches are to pursue these things. They are the visible manifestations of this identity for the watching world.

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Remember, the church is currently these things as Peter points out in 1 Peter 2:9, thus local churches bear this identity and purpose now. Despite the way many churches do not reflect these things well, they are God’s people, His temple, the display of His character to the world, and those who are being made holy. In light of these realities, a host of motivations form for the sake of the revitalization of churches. The foundation for a biblical and theological vision for the revitalization of churches has been laid in their relationship with God the Father, but prior to teasing out the full reasons for revitalization based upon this identity, one must examine the ways in which it is affected through the church’s relationship with the other persons of the Trinity.

**Centered upon Jesus**

Jesus is the center and foundation of our faith. Apart from Him, the people of God do not exist. Peter emphasizes this point by calling Jesus the cornerstone of the church (1 Pet 2:4-10). Earlier in 1 Peter 1, he emphasizes that our salvation is through Jesus (v. 3), our pursuit of holiness is grounded in our ransom with Jesus’ blood (vv. 17-19), and our new life is caused by the word of God (v. 23). Though summarizing this section as “centered upon Jesus” may seem to limit the scope to the person of Jesus, the reality is Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1-14), and the Gospel and Scripture as a whole point to Him and carry His authority and power. Although the primary focus of this section is upon Jesus, both the incarnate and written Word will be examined, for the centrality of Scripture has a significant impact on a healthy vision for revitalization. This dual focus is based upon Allison’s description of the church as “logocentric, or focused on the Word (Gk. logos) of God, understood to refer to Jesus Christ the incarnate Word and Scripture the inspired Word.”89 Essentially, the heart of who the church is to be is grounded in Christ as the incarnate Word and Scripture as the authoritative written Word, which is centered upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Once again, the early church

recognized this vital mark of the church in describing her as apostolic.

Based upon the centrality of Jesus, revitalization should be pursued, for the church’s relationship with Christ provides the grounds for revitalization while the centrality of Jesus’ Gospel forms the essential foundation for the church’s relationship with Him. Through an examination of the logocentricity and apostolic nature of the church, a more complete understanding will be developed for how the church’s relationship with the Trinity forms the primary vision for the revitalization of churches.

The identity of the church is made possible and established in the person and work of Jesus Christ, for He is the one offspring of Abraham (Gal 3:16) through which we are blessed, the temple in which God dwelt among us (John 1:14), the Son through which we receive adoption (Gal 4:4-7), and the list could go on. Even within the centrality of Jesus, Minear emphasizes the ultimate centrality of His substitutionary death for our identity. Several New Testament images stress the centrality of Jesus and His work, yet none more so than Jesus as the cornerstone of the church as seen in 1 Peter 2. In light of Christ as the cornerstone, Jürgen Moltmann highlights logocentricity: “[The church] is indissolubly connected with the doctrine of Jesus, the Christ of God. The name the church gives itself—the church of Jesus Christ—requires us to see Christ as the subject of his church and to bring the church’s life into alignment with him. Thus ecclesiology can only be developed from Christology, as its consequence and in correspondence with it.” Since Jesus is the cornerstone, the understanding and focus of the church must align with Him.

Next, in Ephesians 5:22-31, Paul identifies the church as the bride of Christ. The exclusivity and primacy of the church’s relationship with Jesus is on display with the marital imagery. Paul draws on the Old Testament idea of Israel as His wife. Yet in Hosea

\[\text{Minear, Images of the Church, 103.}\]

one recognizes the adulterous nature of Israel and the need for God to intervene in an astonishing act of sacrificial love to restore and secure the covenant relationship with His people. Paul’s portrayal of Jesus in Ephesians clearly identifies Jesus as the bridegroom who has provided the greatest act of sacrificial love to not only secure the relationship with His bride, the church, but also to sustain and sanctify her: “This sacrifice produces and requires her sanctification and continues to provide care and nourishment for the bride. This whole set of interrelations constitutes, as Paul insists, ‘a great mystery.’”

The source of the church’s holiness is grounded in Jesus.

Third, in Colossians 1:18, Paul describes Jesus as the head of the body, the church. Jesus as the head of the church communicates both His preeminence (Col 1:18) as well as His authority (Eph 5:23-24). Paul once again uses this image in 1 Corinthians 12 to emphasize not only the oneness the church possesses with Christ as our head, but also the various roles we have been given to build up the church “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Ultimately, as the body, the church works together to grow into Christ’s likeness and build itself up in love through the use of their various gifts (Eph 4:11-16). Thus, the healthier the body is functioning in relation to her head, the more the church will be displaying who Jesus is to one another and the world. In other words, as the church is centered upon Jesus, she will be living out her identity as holy worshipers for God’s glory.

The fourth major image portrays Jesus as the shepherd of His flock, the church. In John 10:11-18, Jesus describes himself as the “good shepherd” utilizing an image used of God in relation to His people in the Old Testament. Once again, a connection is drawn between the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. Jacob and David describe God as their shepherd (Gen 48:15; Ps 23:1). He is identified as the shepherd of all of Israel (Ps 80:1), and the people of God are identified as His flock (Ps 77:20, 78:52). Each of these texts emphasizes the loving leadership and protection that

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92 Minear, *Images of the Church*, 55.
God provides for His people. The image of God as shepherd is particularly relevant for revitalization. Timothy Z. Witmer explains, “The reassurance of his faithfulness is given to them even when they are straying. Isaiah writes, ‘He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young’ (Isa. 40:11 NIV).”

God leads, protects, and pursues His people, and the focus of this shepherd imagery turns to Jesus throughout the New Testament. He knows, protects, leads, and lays down his life for His sheep, who are one flock under His care (John 10:11-18). He is the one who leaves the ninety-nine and pursues the lost sheep until He finds it (Luke 15:1-7). He teaches against anxiety and comforts His followers by bringing the images of shepherd and flock to mind (Luke 12:32), for He, as their shepherd, will care for them holistically. Minear asserts that “the fortunes of the sheep are dependent on the character and fate of the shepherd (Matt. 26:31).” As the flock, the church is dependent on Christ as her shepherd. As sheep, the people of God never outgrow this dependency, for unlike children who mature and leave home, sheep always need the shepherd “to care for them, feed them, lead them, and protect them.

Therefore, the imagery of shepherd-sheep captures the comprehensive sovereignty of the shepherd over the sheep and the need of the sheep to yield completely to his care. The good news is that the Lord uses his sovereign power for the well-being of his flock.” One way that Jesus cares for His flock is by providing pastors, or shepherds, to lead, feed, and protect His flock under His leadership as the “chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:1-4). Jesus’ qualities as shepherd—leader, provider, protector, and pursuer—provide the paradigm for the roles entrusted to His undershepherds and contribute to a vision for revitalization.

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94 Minear, Images of the Church, 85.

Centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ

In addition to the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ, His Gospel is central as well. Though the logocentric nature of the church includes the importance of all of Scripture, the focus here is upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the central message of Scripture. The Bible is one message and story. John Stott argues exactly this point: “The Bible does not just contain the gospel; it is the gospel. Through the Bible God is himself actually evangelizing, that is, communicating the good news to the world. . . . All Scripture preaches the gospel; God evangelizes through it.” The Gospel is certainly a good news message to be believed, but it’s also the overarching story of God and His universe. Matt Chandler has articulated this perspective well by arguing for the importance of both the “gospel on the ground” and “in the air.” Recognizing both of these aspects of the Gospel is vital for understanding the centrality of Jesus in the Gospel and of the Gospel in the Bible.

First, the Gospel on the ground is what must be preached that people would be saved (Rom 10:13-17). It is what C. H. Dodd broke down as the kerygma from the sermons in the book of Acts. Essentially, the gospel on the ground can be summarized this way: God, man, Jesus, response. It is the evangelistic message to the individual that God is holy, and man is totally sinful and deserving of God’s holy, righteous wrath as a result. Yet, Jesus came, lived a perfect life, and died as our substitute taking on the wrath of God for our sins and making His righteousness and relationship with God available to us. In order to receive that salvation, we simply repent and believe the Gospel. We turn from sin and trust in Jesus and His work on the cross as our hope. This overview is the Gospel as it is presented in summary passages such as Romans 3:21-26 and Ephesians


2:1-10. What becomes evident is that Jesus is central, and as Martin Luther argued, “To preach the gospel is nothing else than Christ’s coming to us to bring us to him.”

Second, the Gospel in the air can be summarized as Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. When God created everything, it was good and was under his perfect reign. Yet, when Adam and Eve sinned, sin entered the world and corrupted everything. Humanity’s relationship was severed with God and with each other. The world itself was suddenly broken. Jesus came and made a way for the redemption of everything by dying on the cross. His blood has secured the final part of the story: restoration. Ultimately, the entire world will one day be restored to an even greater glory than that of the garden of Eden. The shalom—perfect peace, justice, and love of God—will be finally and fully manifested in the world once again in the new creation. The Gospel in the air is the redemptive storyline of Scripture and history itself. The entire story of Scripture centers on Jesus in that it is either pointing and leading toward or flowing from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Both the story and message of the Gospel revolves around Jesus and, as a result, forms the essential foundation for the church’s relationship with Him. For only through stepping into this story by repenting and believing the message of the Gospel can one have a relationship with Jesus and be part of the people of God. The centrality of Jesus and His Gospel is a significant reason the early church identified the New Testament people of God as apostolic in nature.

The Apostolic Nature of the Church

In the Nicene Creed, the church is described as apostolic. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul writes that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” but what does it mean for the church to be apostolic in this sense? Essentially, the message and mission of the apostles forms the foundation of the church. While the apostles’ mission is a vital aspect of this mark (see chapter four for the mission of the apostles

99Martin Luther quoted in Avis, Reformers, 89.
defining the mission of the church), the focus of this section will be upon the message. The Gospel is their message, and as a result, the apostolic nature of the church reinforces the centrality of Jesus and His Gospel. The early church father Tertullian described apostolicity in the following way:

> From this, therefore, do we draw up our rule. Since the Lord Jesus Christ sent the apostles to preach, (our rule is) that no others ought to be received as preachers than those whom Christ appointed. . . . Now, what that was which they preached—in other words, what it was which Christ revealed to them. . . . If, then, these things are so, it is in the same degree manifest that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches—those moulds and original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God.\(^\text{100}\)

Basically, the apostolic nature of the church means she is founded on the teaching of the apostles. As the Reformers sought to return the Roman Catholic Church to the true Gospel, the five *solas* of the Reformation make up the essential nature of the apostolic church according to Ryken. He rightly argues, “An apostolic church is Christ-centered in its preaching, Bible-based in its teaching, grace-dependent in its ministry, faith seeking in its evangelism, and God-glorifying in its vision. . . . These are the Protestant Reformation doctrines: Christ alone, Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, and to God alone be the glory!”\(^\text{101}\) These themes are evident throughout the preaching of the apostles in Acts as well as their writings in the New Testament. Not only does the apostolic nature reinforce the centrality of Christ and the Gospel, but it also reaffirms the doxological nature of the church.

**Empowered by the Spirit**

As a result of the church’s relationship with Jesus, she has been empowered by the Spirit. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to dwell within the disciples when He leaves (John 15:26, 16:7), and He emphasizes the power that the Holy Spirit will provide

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for them (Acts 1:8). Overall, this idea is captured by Allison’s description of the church as “pneumadynamic, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.”  

The central truth of this facet of the church is that the power and life of the Spirit is present and active in true churches. The creative work of the Spirit is the first place the power of the Spirit is seen. In Acts 1-2, the Spirit creates the church initially, but He does not end His work there. He continues to gather the church into local bodies and empower her for mission throughout the book of Acts. To this day, He continues to form churches together by the work He does in salvation to bring people to faith in Christ. From an outsider’s perspective, the church may be organized by the work of a particular man or group of people, but no true church is created without the supernatural work of the Spirit of God to reconcile people both to God and one another.

After the creation of the church, the Spirit provides the ongoing power and life needed to bring about continual growth and health in the body of believers. Allison points to several key passages as he describes the necessary work of the Spirit in the life of the church:

He provides everything that is needed to overcome the power of sin, and by the fruit he produces Christians exhibit more and more the characteristics of Jesus Christ in their lives (Gal. 5: 16–23). For this reason Christians are to be guided by the Spirit (Rom. 8: 4–8) or filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5: 18), that is, controlled by and submissive to his leading. The Spirit also aids them in prayer (Rom. 8: 26–27) and illumines their understanding of the Word of God (1 Cor. 2: 10–16).  

Also, the Spirit seals and protects His church (Eph 1:13-14), thus a true church possesses not only the power for growth and health, but also the Spirit’s protection as she continues in faithfulness.

Finally, the Spirit empowers the church for ministry. His empowerment is seen throughout the New Testament as He gives boldness to the churches in Acts. The Spirit also provides gifts for believers to utilize for ministry to both the church and the world. In

102 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 2853-55.

103 Ibid., locs. 2868-72.
1 Corinthians 12:7-11, each member of the church is granted various gifts by the Spirit. As Allison asserts, the Spirit possesses sovereign control over the distribution of these gifts.\textsuperscript{104} Many of these gifts are for the express purpose of fulfilling the church’s identity as worshipers not only individually, but also corporately. Clowney points out, “Proclamation of the Word of God, prayer, singing of the praises of God, offering ourselves to God, along with the ministry of our possessions: all these elements of worship are enabled by gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:28; 14:1, 6, 14, 15; 2 Cor. 9:12; Rom. 12:1-2; 15:16; 1 Peter 4:9-11).”\textsuperscript{105} Lest one mistakenly imagine the Spirit as an impersonal force from which the church is to draw for the sake of ministry or mission, one must recognize the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity. He is personally working in and through us for our good and God’s glory. The Spirit is not some power to manipulate as Simon Magnus sought to do (Acts 8:9-24), but He is the one through whom the church enjoys fellowship with God and the redemptive power of God.\textsuperscript{106} Without the Spirit’s gracious giving of these gifts, churches are hopeless in accomplishing the mission set before them, and dying churches are left without the power needed to make a comeback.

**Worshipers of God Centered upon Jesus**  
**Empowered by the Spirit**  

Prior to developing the reasons for revitalization that flow from this first primary identity, a brief recap is in order. The church is the community of worshipers of God for His glory in and through Jesus by the power of the Spirit, and as a result, local churches are visible manifestations of this identity. Local churches are particular communities of worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. They are part of the elect people of God through all of history and bear a

\textsuperscript{104}Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, locs. 2885-87.


\textsuperscript{106}Ibid.
doxological orientation intended to be exhibited through gathering for worship and growing in holiness. This identity can be manifested only if a church is centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. To be centered upon Jesus, churches must align with Jesus’ life and teaching as the cornerstone, submit to Him as the head and bridegroom, and rely upon and trust His care as the chief shepherd. Additionally, they must know and orient their lives according His Gospel. Finally, healthy churches must be reliant upon the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain, renew, and equip them for life and ministry. The church inherently possesses this identity and the associated qualities, but the reality is that for many local churches, these characteristics are diminishing at best. Yet, as long as any local church remains a true church, she bears this identity, and in light of that, not only does she have the means for revitalization, but she also has significant reason to pursue revitalization with hope and zeal.

**Reasons for Revitalization**

No single source provides a greater vision for the revitalization of churches than the relationship they enjoy with the Trinity as worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Several significant reasons to pursue revitalization flow directly from this relationship. First, true churches are not established on their own terms. They have been chosen by God as part of His people through all time by the same means: His mercy and grace. Peter emphasized this important characteristic of God’s people throughout the first two chapters of His first letter. Schreiner asserts, “The message of mercy that opened the letter at 1:3 now closes a major section of the letter in 2:10. Peter reminded the readers again that they are recipients of God’s grace, that the foundation for obeying the imperatives is God’s mercy in Christ.”107 Churches do not come into existence on the strength of their work or character, and neither are they sustained primarily by their effort, skill, or character. God alone establishes and sustains

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107Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 116.
His church and individual churches by His initiative based on His mercy and grace (Matt 16:18). The character and orientation of God toward churches should mark the disposition of those considering revitalization. When God creates His people, He does not choose them because they are attractive on their own merits. Instead, He has chosen to love and continues to love because of His faithfulness (Deut 7:7-8, 1 Pet 2:10). Churches may be distorted and grotesque in many ways, even filled with unbelievers. But, if true believers and a true church remain to whatever degree, then the abundant mercy and grace of God prompt a merciful, humble, and patient response. Gracious, loving, and sacrificial action for the sake of revitalization should be taken whether or not hope seems slim. In addition to the identity of churches as recipients of God’s mercy and grace, ministers have received mercy and grace from God personally, and God’s love is the ultimate foundation for their obedience to God and love for others (1 John 4:19). The mercy and grace of God toward His people initiates, motivates, and sustains the ministry of church revitalization.

**The Goal of Holy Worshipers**

God has chosen to create a people by pouring out His mercy and grace for a purpose. God’s people are worshipers for the sake of His glory. The doxological orientation of the church is also the ultimate purpose for everything God created. Whether or not one pursues any endeavor or ministry must be determined in light of this grand design. God’s glory is to be at the center of anything we do as followers of Jesus (1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:23). One of the most important reasons revitalization must be pursued is for the sake of God’s great name. As the pinnacle of His creative work, the church exists as a display people. Churches are called to not only proclaim God’s greatness, but also to display His goodness in their works (1 Pet 2:10-12). Paul argues that the church is to display diverse aspects of God’s wisdom to the heavenly beings (Eph 3:10). Churches are to exhibit the glory of God in both their formation and ongoing growth in faithfulness.
Additionally, she is to be a “pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). Churches must not only witness to the truth of God and His Word through proclamation, but also through their deeds. Ed Stetzer and Jerry Rankin attest, “Failure to show faithfulness is failure to display God's goodness and glory.” For good or for ill, churches are reflective of who God is due to their doxological nature.

Many of the images discussed in this chapter contribute to an understanding of the church as a display people for God’s glory. Perhaps most significant, the temple and bride images emphasize this doxological nature especially displayed through the holiness of the church. Both images communicate the call to and goal of holiness in the lives of churches. The expectation for holiness has escalated from the Old Testament people of God to the church. Clowney affirms, “The quest for holiness among the New Israel is both individual and corporate. Not only must each Christian pursue holiness: the church must grow together in the image of Christ, and must exclude from its fellowship those who are heretics or impenitent sinners (Rom. 16:7f; 1 Cor. 5:9-13).” Though justified and holy in the sight of God, the people of God remain on a journey toward holiness. Paul expresses the expectation of growth in holiness over time, or progressive sanctification, in both Colossians 1:28 and Ephesians 4:13. The journey to maturity in Christ will inevitably involve seasons of growth and decline. Yet, no matter the current state of a particular church, every congregation bears the same call toward holiness for the sake of displaying God’s holiness.

Healthy churches growing in holiness as a community magnify the glory of God and bring honor to His name in a variety of ways. In addition to what they proclaim, they uphold truth about who God is simply by the way they live. On the other hand, dying churches display increasingly false ideas about God. Typically, churches in decline...
are experiencing deterioration due partly to sin in the camp. As holiness becomes less and less characteristic of who they are, a church defames God’s name and undermines the truth about God. Yes, this scenario should grieve the spirit of any faithful believer, but rather than turning away in disgust, hoping to find something better, or starting over, revitalization must be pursued. The early church father Cyprian exhorts, “For although there seem to be tares in the church, yet neither our faith nor our charity ought to be hindered, so that because we see that there are tares in the church we ourselves should withdraw from the church: we ought only to labour that we may be wheat.”110 Not only should Christians remain faithful to the church and the pursuit of personal holiness, but we must also pursue the revitalization of churches that they might be wheat. The glory of God is at stake. What greater reason exists for any pursuit in all creation? As long as a church remains a true church, the call to repent and pursue holiness remains for the sake of God’s glory. But someone must rise up to proclaim that call, for often the dearth of faithfulness is due to the lack of faithful leadership and proclamation.

Ultimately, we should revitalize because God is passionate about and zealous to defend the proper display of His glory. Additionally, revitalization should be pursued because God seeks to be glorified by bringing His people back into the proper relationship with Him. When holiness wanes, idolatry is often the root of the issue. The doxological nature of a church has become oriented toward the wrong object. Essentially, the church’s worship has been corrupted, and while this corruption is as serious an offense as possible given the purpose for which the church has been created, the good news is that God passionately pursues the restoration of exclusive worship.

Clearly, God insists upon worship that is solely directed toward Himself (Exod 20:3-5). Clowney emphasizes this point further: “The forms, as well as the object, of our

worship must be exclusive. God will not tolerate worship through idols, but insists that he be worshiped in the way that he has commanded (Dt. 12:30-32). All this is to say that worship is a total commitment. It is nothing if not extravagant. To withhold anything is to fail to worship (Dt. 6:4-9).”

The promotion of God’s glory is in direct opposition to idolatry. When the glory of the Lord fills the temple once again in Ezekiel 43, the people are commanded to stop “whoring” after idols. Even though churches are to be oriented toward the glory of God, many lose their way in pursuit of various idols. Allison writes that churches “can become heterodoxological. Paul addresses this tragic temptation in 2 Corinthians 11:1– 4, confronting the reality of the Corinthian church being enticed to false glory giving through the substitution of a different Jesus, a different spirit, or a different gospel for its rightful and true focus of attention.”

Even when churches do lose their way into various forms of idolatry, God does not desire to leave them there as is evidenced throughout Scripture. He seeks to redeem His people from the bondage of idolatry. In the Old Testament, God shows His patience time and again, and in Ezekiel 36 one can see God’s passion for bringing His people back into proper relationship with Himself. In the New Testament, this theme comes up many times as Paul and other New Testament writers exhort churches to turn from their erroneous ways. For instance, in connection with the temple imagery, Paul urges the Corinthians to flee idolatry in 2 Corinthians 6:16-18.

The implications for church revitalization that flow from the doxological nature of the church and God’s desire to reorient people to His glory are vital for understanding why churches should be revitalized. If God is so passionate about the proper declaration of His glory, Christians’ hearts should ache when churches fail to manifest His glory in a way that is worthy of His name. Churches become consumed by idols of pride, consumerism, power, and numerous other things that place God and His


112Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 2689-91.
glory well below the position He deserves. If churches are dying because they are unholy, these churches are not proclaiming the glory of God in a way that honors His name. Our passion should align with God’s passion for His glory to be manifested in His church specifically through bringing His people back into a proper relationship with Him. Thus, a passion for revitalization is woven into the heart of God and the creation of His church. Just as God showed patience with the people of Israel throughout times of rebellion and idolatry, God’s steadfast love and slowness to anger continues to be active today with His church and specific local churches. His patient, steadfast love is particularly seen in Christ’s character as the Chief Shepherd, for He pursues the lost and wandering. Christians must be careful not to quickly condemn what God is patiently pursuing and working to revive and reconcile to Himself.

Along these same lines, the apostolic nature of the church reminds us that she bears the message of God’s restoration. When Paul writes that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation in Romans 1:16, he is not simply arguing for a singular moment of justification at the beginning of the Christian life but the completion of salvation—sanctification and preservation—throughout the lives of believers. The centrality of the Gospel for the church provides the power and pattern for restoration and revitalization: repent and believe. Until Christ returns, our individual and corporate relationship with Christ will be characterized by this foundational message. Donald Bloesch explains the point well: "The church is already apostolic, but it must become more concisely apostolic by allowing the gospel to reform and sometimes even overturn its time-honored rites and interpretations."\textsuperscript{113} The Gospel produces holiness in believers and churches,\textsuperscript{114} the Gospel creates a people who are doxological, and the Gospel reforms a people who have become heterodoxological. If churches are centered upon a message of renewal and hope for

\textsuperscript{113}Donald Bloesch, \textit{The Church} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 103.

\textsuperscript{114}John Owen writes, “Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls.” John Owen quoted in Ryken, “A Holy Church,” 62.
those who have rebelled, should not revitalization be pursued as a natural outflow of holding the Gospel dear? We should want to see renewal brought to places of desolation, for the Gospel is a message of restoration and revitalization for the dying and broken.

Also, as a display people, churches exhibit the truth and power of the Gospel in their lives. If a church is dying, the testimony given to the Gospel is that it lacks power. Some may begin to wonder about the truthfulness of the Gospel. Yet, if a dying church experiences revitalization, the power of the Gospel will be magnified. The beauty and truth of the Gospel will be manifested before a watching world. God will be glorified in a special way through the power of the Gospel restoring life and holiness to communities of faith, thus a passion for the revitalization of churches should flow from a faith in, love for, and defense of the Gospel.

The Purposes of the Corporate Worship Gathering and Undershepherds

Next, the very purposes of the regular corporate worship gathering and pastors as shepherds provide clear reasons for the pursuit of church revitalization. One of the primary aspects of the people of God that churches manifest is as God’s worshipping assembly. Based on this truth, Clowney argues that corporate worship is not optional but a necessary expression of the church.\textsuperscript{115} Mitchell Chase explains not only the importance, but also the nature of biblical corporate worship in the following:

If we love Jesus and the gospel which heralds his lordship, and if we want our churches to do the same, then we must learn the truth about church services. The following three truths are nothing new, but they are crucial to remember. . . . Corporate worship should make much of God. Church is not about us. . . . Corporate worship is not a spectator sport. Believers shouldn’t attend church with a spectator mentality. Corporate worship requires the active engagement of the saints in four primary areas: praying, singing, giving, and listening. Corporate worship is (mainly) for believers.\textsuperscript{116}

Corporate worship is a regular active doxological event for the community of faith. While


\textsuperscript{116}Mitchell Chase, \textit{The Gospel Is for Christians} (Brenham, TX: Lucid Books, 2010), 195-98.
weekly corporate worship gathering is to be oriented toward the glory of God, it is rightly for the sake of Christians. The author of Hebrews highlights the vital nature of the weekly gathering of the saints for the sake of encouragement to remain firm in the faith and live loving and holy lives (Heb 10:23-25). In part, corporate worship is intended to function as an agent for renewal and revitalization. The gathering is meant to re-orient the individual Christian and corporate life of the church with the proper goal of God’s glory, and this recalibration occurs through remembering and realigning her life with Christ through the Gospel. Considering we live in a fallen world that is at odds with our churches and God’s purposes, we desperately need regular communal realignment. Jonathan Wilson confirms, “False worship is learned in community, and it must be unlearned in community. And the only way to counter the weight of the community that is constantly teaching us false worship is through the weight of an alternative community.”

Thus, the worship gathering is a gift from God for the purpose of regular reorientation through “our language and practices [that] together teach us what the world really looks like and is according to the gospel.”

Certainly, God has created His people as an assembly for the sake of His glory, but it is also for our benefit. We are called to gather regularly that we might be refreshed personally and revitalized corporately. The provision of corporate worship marks both the expectation that churches will need revitalization and God’s desire to see them actually revitalized.

In addition to the worship gathering, pastors have a clear revitalizing purpose as shepherds modeled after and serving under Jesus. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah excoriate the leaders of Israel because they have not cared for God’s people as faithful shepherds, and as a result, His people are severely unhealthy (Ezek 34:4-6; Jer 23:1-2). The shepherd theme continues in the New Testament with Jesus as the Good Shepherd and

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118 Ibid., 72.

pastors as his undershepherds to fulfill the promise to “set shepherds over [God’s people] who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord” (Jer 23:4). As shepherds, pastors are called to pursue wandering or unhealthy sheep whether individuals or whole flocks. Witmer insists, “The discovery of stray sheep is not a matter for complacency but for decisive action. The likelihood of one of the sheep surviving on its own is of serious enough concern that the shepherd leaves the other sheep behind to find it. Remember that central to the Lord’s complaint against the shepherds of Israel was their failure to pursue the sheep who had wandered away.” Pastors have been given to the church for the sake of the revitalization of churches. Of course, many legitimate ministries exist for the man called to pastoral ministry, but church revitalization should be a primary emphasis of a significant portion of pastors in light of their nature as shepherds.

Not only does the heart of the shepherd for weakened sheep and flocks lead toward the revitalization of churches, but the glory of God should as well. Moses is a prime picture of a shepherd pursuing the well-being of his flock not only for their good, but for the glory of God as well. For example, his intercession is both driven by and based upon the character of God and the display nature of His people (Num 14:13-19). In addition to the pastoral call to revitalization, every believer possesses a similar call due to the priesthood of the believer. As priests, Beale explains, “Our ongoing task is to serve God in his temple in which we always dwell and of which we are a part. Our continual priestly tasks are what the first Adam’s were to be: to keep the order and peace of the spiritual sanctuary by learning and teaching God’s word, by praying always, and by being

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120 Witmer, The Shepherd Leader, 33.

121 Ibid., 173.
vigilant in keeping out unclean moral and spiritual things.” Essentially, every believer carries a measure of responsibility for the growth and purity of his or her church. The pastor has been given as a shepherd and every believer as a priest for the sake of the revitalization of their churches. In light of these purposes, a significant portion of men called to pastoral ministry must consider devoting their lives to the ministry of church revitalization.

The Hope for Revitalization

Finally, the relationship of the church with the Holy Spirit provides hope for revitalization. In what ways does the Spirit provide hope? First, the work of the Spirit in a true church is powerful and makes revitalization possible. The pinnacle of His work toward this end is “the gift of the Spirit’s intercession for us. At best, we do not know what or how to pray in accordance with the perfect purpose and will of God, but the Spirit intercedes for us, and in us, with groanings that go beyond words.” He is present in churches, in part, for the sake of revitalization. The Spirit enlightens our hearts to know the hope, inheritance, and power of the Gospel (Eph 1:17-19) and through that enlightenment to apply the Gospel to our lives for the glory of God whether in corporate worship, church leadership, or individual interactions. Second, with the presence of the Spirit, a church has the power needed to shore up the first two marks of the church. Growth in holiness and faithfulness to the Gospel comes through the transformative power of the Spirit who fuels sanctification (Rom 15:16, 1 Cor 6:11). Third, the Spirit equips the church with the gifts needed for revitalization. We are given spiritual gifts for the sake of building up the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7). When churches become unhealthy, the Spirit has already equipped them with the gifts they need to pursue

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revitalization, so rather than feeling defeated or giving up, a new season of growth and health should be pursued with the confidence that the Spirit has equipped them for this very purpose. Ultimately, we should revitalize because the Spirit created the church and empowers the church for change and renewal.

**Conclusion**

The relationship of the church with the Trinity is the primary source of vision and motivation for the revitalization of churches. Along with being made holy and apostolic, her inherent identity as worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit forms the essential foundation for the ministry of revitalization. The reasons for revitalization flow from these realities. The nature of the church’s relationship with God through electing grace and mercy, her purpose as a display people for His glory, the intention of aligning with Christ and His Gospel, the aim of the corporate worship gathering and pastors as agents of revitalization, and the object of the Spirit’s empowerment, all point to a clear biblical call to church revitalization. Though other important reasons for revitalization exist, a love for God and His glory as well as a deep appreciation for His relationship with His people is the prime, biblical vision for revitalization.

Next, the church’s familial identity will be examined. Although secondary, the nature of the church as family with one another is an essential element of a vision for the revitalization of churches. The creedal mark of oneness, New Testament images, and the covenantal and confessional natures of the church will provide a clear understanding of churches as family with one another. Once again, clear reasons for revitalization will be articulated based upon the identity of the church.
Dying churches typically exhibit a host of symptoms, and one widespread marker is divisiveness. Churches experience division for a variety of reasons ranging from personal or political to theological or methodological. The tragedy of division within churches is multi-faceted; yet, the most tragic aspect is the overall lack of oneness that our Lord intends for His people to experience (John 17:20-23). Unity among God’s people is much more than the mere lack of divisive infighting. Christian unity is a spiritual oneness that affects every aspect of corporate life including, but not limited to, the following: theological concerns, physical and emotional needs, and missional endeavors. The unity within churches is intended to be so extensive that they are identified as family with one another. The identity of churches, specifically local church members, as family with one another is another key foundation for the argument being made for the revitalization of churches. The nature of the relationship among God’s people, especially those who have covenanted together as a local church, provides further motivation and vision for church revitalization.

In this chapter, I will establish the ecclesiological foundation of churches as family with one another through an examination of another Nicene creedal mark, several New Testament images and patterns, and the covenantal and confessional natures. From this foundation, three reasons for pursuing church revitalization will be extrapolated: the

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1 George Barna, *Turn Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 39. Barna provides a list of symptoms of dying churches: “Divisive internal politics, inadequate Christian education and training, dilapidated facilities, frequent changes in leadership positions, pastor-centered ministry, emotional discouragement among the congregation, unreconciled theological disagreement, absence of ministry opportunities for people, financial decline, loss of key laypeople, loss of critical staff members, lowering of ministry standards, denominational meddling, a shift from Bible-centered teaching, absence of an assimilation program.”
goal of oneness, the purposes of the corporate gathering and church membership, and the call to value the entire body of Christ.

Ecclesiological Foundation

My argument for the revitalization of churches is grounded in the nature of the church itself. A lasting vision for church revitalization must be established on an ecclesiological foundation based upon the identities of the church given by God; thus, the identity of the church as family with one another provides the next facet of a biblical and theological vision for the revitalization of churches. This identity was recognized by the early church through its description of the church as one in the Nicene Creed. The marker of oneness was articulated based upon the biblical evidence of New Testament images and patterns describing God’s new covenant people. Also, two theological categories, covenantal and confessional natures of the church, articulated by Allison further define the familial identity of the church. This ecclesiological foundation for the church as family with one another will provide further motivation and vision for the revitalization of churches.

Nicene Creed: One

The authors of the Nicene Creed asserted clearly and succinctly that the church is one. While the authors of the creed were primarily asserting that the Roman Catholic Church is the one and only church to the exclusion of all others claiming to be churches, their commitment to defend the idea of oneness flows from their theological conviction of the church’s unity rooted in the one gospel and one Spirit. The significance of the unity of the church among the early church fathers is clearly seen in the value that Clement of Alexandria places upon oneness when he writes, “But the pre-eminence of the church, as the principle of union, is, in its oneness, in this surpassing all things else, and having

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nothing like or equal to itself.”3 Explaining the importance of this creedal mark of the church, Dever argues, “The church is one and is to be one because God is one. Christians have always been characterized by their unity (Acts 4:32). The unity of Christians in the church is to be a property of the church and a sign for the world reflecting the unity of God himself. Thus, divisions and quarrels are a peculiarly serious scandal.”4

The significance of the unity of the church is rooted in what unifies the church: the gospel and the Holy Spirit. The early church father Irenaeus argued for the oneness of the church based upon her apostolic character, specifically the reception and proclamation of apostolic doctrine.5 Delineating the extent of this unity, Irenaeus explains:

All [churches] receive one and the same God the Father, and believe in the same dispensation regarding the incarnation of the Son of God, and are cognizant of the same gift of the Spirit, and are conversant with the same commandments, and preserve the same form of ecclesiastical constitution, and expect the same advent of the Lord, and await the same salvation of the complete man, that is, of the soul and body. And undoubtedly the preaching of the church is true and stedfast, in which one and the same way of salvation is shown throughout the whole world.6

The oneness of the church is built upon the “common faith that united individual churches into one.”7 True churches possess a unity concerning the content of the gospel. Our unity is enabled not through ridding ourselves of content but rather through setting clear boundaries of the Gospel around which we unify. Richard D. Phillips argues that

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5Irenaeus of Lyons, “Irenæus against Heresies,” in The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 331. Irenaeus writes, “As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth.”

6Irenaeus, “Irenæus against Heresies,” 548.

7Gregg R. Allison, Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 567.
boundaries are necessary for the unity that the early church expressed in the Nicene Creed, and the boundaries given are the truths of the Gospel (see 1 Cor 15:1-4 and Gal 1:6-7).\(^8\)

The church is united not only in the common content and object of our faith but also in one Spirit (Eph 4:3-4). The Holy Spirit makes the unity of the church a present reality and a practical possibility. Peter Thomas O’Brien explains, “The church’s unity is described as the unity of the Spirit, which signifies a unity that God’s Spirit creates and therefore not the readers’ own achievement, yet they are exhorted urgently to maintain it. God has inaugurated this unity in Christ, through the events described in Ephesians 2:11–22, as a result of which believers, Jew and Gentile together, have access to God ‘in one Spirit’ (2:18).”\(^9\) The Spirit creates the unity of the church and enables her to practically experience unity through the impartation of spiritual gifts and the production of fruit of the Spirit.

In discussing the biblical evidence for the oneness of the church, Phillips explains that Scripture asserts “not that there ought to be one body, but that there is one body, one unified church.”\(^10\) Yet, many would object that the church appears to be the very essence of disunity, especially as one examines the multiplication of denominations from the Reformation forward. In light of our current reality, how can one seriously affirm the unity of the church? Once again, Phillips is helpful as he addresses the issue of denominations: “Denominations allow us to have organizational unity where we have full agreement, and allow us to have spiritual unity with other denominations, since we are not forced to argue our way to perfect agreement but can accept our differences of

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opinion on secondary matters.”¹¹ Denominations provide for unity among the essentials and diversity in the non-essentials.

Additionally, James Montgomery Boice points out, “The worst times in the history of the church have been when everyone has been part of one large organization. It is not that kind of unity. The unity for which Jesus prayed is a unity patterned on the unity of the Father and the Son. That is, it is a unity of mind, will, love, and purpose.”¹² In John 17:20-23, Jesus prays for the church to experience the oneness that He and His Father experience. This unity does not mean a lack of denominations or separate churches, but instead, as highlighted in the relationship of the Father and the Son, believers, churches, and denominations can be distinct while unified. Carson explains, “The Father and the Son are distinguishable (the pre-incarnate Word is ‘with’ God, 1:1; the Son prays to his Father; the Father commissions and sends, while the Son obeys), yet they are one. Similarly, the believers, still distinct, are to be one in purpose, in love, in action undertaken with and for one another, in joint submission to the revelation received.”¹³ Within local churches, though unified in the Spirit and the gospel, disagreements arise often, and while these disagreements often lead to division, this does not have to be the case. Local churches can grow in unity and love even in light of differences of opinion. Phillips argues,

We often think how terrible it is that Christ does not give us full agreement in all things in this life so that we would be able to experience the fullness of love within the body. But perhaps we have it backward. On the one hand, we must develop these attributes Paul speaks of here—humility, gentleness, patience, long-suffering—in order to enjoy our unity. That is true. But perhaps the converse is truer. Perhaps the Lord leaves us with differences to work out in order to teach us how to love.¹⁴ Differences and disagreements may come, but they are opportunities to grow into a

¹¹Phillips, The Church, 27.
¹⁴Phillips, The Church, 38.
greater depth of unity. The unity of the church is similar to the holiness of the church. While churches are holy before God, they are still being made holy through sanctification. Similarly, while churches are unified, they are still growing toward perfect unity. The greater the unity, the greater a church will display the glory of God.

The unity that the early church fathers identified as a characteristic marker of the church was not a unity without diversity but a unity in diversity established around a common faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and created and maintained through the one Spirit. While the idea of oneness that is expressed in the identity of the church as family with one another certainly includes the concept of unity in diversity, the familial identity of the church is developed even further throughout the New Testament through a variety of images and patterns.

**New Testament Images of the Church**

The oneness of the church affirmed by the Nicene Creed is evident throughout the New Testament. The biblical authors provide rich imagery and patterns that build a complete concept of the church as family with one another. Three primary themes are accentuated in this section. First, the image of the body of Christ will be explored in which the concept of unity in diversity will be further developed, and the interdependent nature of the church will be articulated. Next, the fellowship of faith will be examined to provide a clear picture of the depth of relationship established among the people of God. Finally, an overview of the one-another commands will provide a summary of the way the church as family is called to relate.

In the New Testament, the theme of oneness is captured most prominently through the image of the body of Christ. W. Harold Mare contends that references to the church as Christ’s body “amplify the interrelatedness, communion, and dependence of the ‘body of Christ’ upon the living God.”15 Thus, this image significantly develops the

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concept of the church’s oneness. Concerning this unity, Clowney references three vital verses for understanding that the foundation of “the unity of the church as Christ’s body rests on the unity of the body of Christ on the cross. The church is one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5); it is a body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27); it is the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12).” These references will now be addressed in the context of their larger passages.

First, Paul utilizes the image of the body of Christ in Romans 12:3-8. In order to promote humility and faithfulness in the use of spiritual gifts within the Roman church, Paul reminds the church members of their unity as “one body in Christ” (Rom 12:5). Despite the diversity of gifts, unity exists among God’s people. Robert H. Mounce argues:

Unity in diversity is the theme that runs through this section. This unity, however, which is spiritual, was only possible because the members were “in Christ,” that is, joined by faith they had become a part of the body of Christ. Since they were all members of one body, it follows that “each member belong[ed] to all the others” (v. 5). The Christian faith is essentially a corporate experience. Although each member has come to faith by a separate and individual act of faith, the believing community lives out its Christian experience in fellowship with one another. . . . “Lone Ranger Christianity” is a contradiction in terms. As articulated by the early church fathers, unity in diversity is an essential element of the church’s oneness, which is clearly intended to be experienced in the local church context. In addition to the unity in diversity theme, Paul establishes the interdependence of the church through the image of the body of Christ. Leon Morris asserts, “Paul does not say ‘members of one body’ but ‘members of one another’ (cf. Eph. 4:25).” No portion of the body can function fully on its own. As one body in Christ, a diverse people is unified and made interdependent.

Next, in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Paul expounds on the image of the body

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again. According to David E. Garland, Paul uses a familiar “political oratory” image to address the disunity in the Corinthian church by highlighting God’s intentionality in creating His people with a need to rely upon and love everyone in the community.\textsuperscript{19} Diversity within the body of Christ is an essential element for her flourishing, for the oneness God intends for His people requires a diversity of gifts (vv. 24-26). Only when a church recognizes her interdependence can she experience complete unity. Beyond developing the idea of interdependence among God’s people, this passage provides further theological underpinnings to the metaphor. Addressing verse thirteen, Garland clarifies how the church experiences oneness as the body of Christ: “Whatever the specifics of Paul’s analogy, the point is that the Spirit saturates the church body and that all Christians are imbued with the same Spirit. It occurs at their conversion when they confess Jesus as Lord and are placed by the Spirit in Christ’s body, in which they become interdependent limbs and organs.”\textsuperscript{20} Within this single text, one finds that the origin of the body of Christ is clearly Trinitarian. The Father designed Christ’s body to be formed through the Spirit in such a way that the church would be a unified, diverse, and interdependent people.

Finally, in Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul addresses the issue of unity and maturity in conjunction with the body of Christ image. Paul calls the Ephesian church to live worthy of her calling by maintaining the unity they have as “one body” (vv. 1-4). The oneness of the Ephesian church is seen clearly as Paul highlights the ground of the members’ unity in the fact that there is one Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and God (vv. 4-5). In addition to emphasizing the unity of the church through the body image, Paul expresses the goal of the church as the body. The various members contribute to one another’s growth so that the whole church might reach maturity in Christ and take part in Christ’s


\textsuperscript{20}Garland, \textit{1 Corinthians}, 591.
“goal of filling all things.” Peter T. O’Brien continues, “Having achieved dominion over all the powers through his victorious ascent, he sovereignly distributes gifts to the members of his body. The building of the body is inextricably linked with his intention of filling the universe with his rule, since the church is his instrument in carrying out his purposes for the cosmos.” Lastly, the source of authority and nourishment for the church as the body is found in Christ as her head (vv. 15-16).

In summary, the body of Christ image expresses several aspects of the church’s identity as family with one another. First, the church is a unified diversity. Second, her members are interdependent. God has created His people in such a way that each member must rely on the other members for healthy growth. As a result, humility, love, and care for one another are characteristic expressions. Third, the church participates in the mission of God through its growth in oneness. Finally, as the body, the church has one final authority and source of nourishment: Jesus Christ.

Next, the fellowship in faith is a consistent theme throughout the New Testament concerning the church. Through the body imagery, one recognizes that the identity of the church as family with one another is grounded in her relationship with Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). Clowney argues, “For that reason the fellowship of the body is a sharing together in fellowship with Christ. The fundamental idea expressed in koinonia is not the link that joins Christians to each other, but the common bond that unites them to Christ.” In light of Clowney’s point, the idea of fellowship discussed in the following pages is an inherent aspect of any true church because the mutuality of the church is rooted in our shared relationship with Jesus rather than any other external commonality or practice. Ultimately, the following study of the New Testament concept of fellowship established in faith in Christ will further develop the concept of the church’s family life.

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22 Ibid., 297.

To begin, a brief examination of the word typically translated as fellowship—
koinonia—is in order. According to Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, κοινωνία
is “an association involving close mutual relations and involvement.”24 H. G. Liddell
includes “communion, association, partnership, [and] fellowship” in his definition.25
Christian fellowship is included in the earliest summary passage describing the church
(Acts 2:42-47). The concept of rich communion among those united by faith is evident in
the extent of their shared life together. They not only shared their physical possessions,
but they developed relationships over meals and worshipped together (Acts 2:44-47).
Daniel L. Guder explains, “This communal reality of holy living, mutual support, and
sacrificial service the New Testament calls koinonia.”26 While an important starting point,
koinonia is only the beginning of understanding the New Testament concept of
fellowship. Anthony Casurella maintains, “This word group, however, does not exhaust
the idea of Christian fellowship and is insufficient to develop this theme fully in the
literature of the later NT and the apostolic fathers.”27 More must be articulated
concerning the fellowship of God’s people to have a full scope of the church’s identity as
family with one another.

In Minear’s study of church images, the fellowship in faith is one of his four
overarching categories, and the unifying nature of faith is an essential aspect of this
communal life of the church. Our relationship with Jesus through faith is tied closely with
our relationship with people in the church (Matt 10:40-42; 25:45; John 13:20).28 Minear


focuses on the use of “with” (syn) in the New Testament as it pertains to the church. He notes:

One primary use of the preposition is to show the mutual dependence of the community on Christ. The preposition points to a bond with Christ so strong that nothing can destroy it. (Col. 3:3-4; Rom. 8:32). When we ask about the verbs used in the compound relationship we find that they are those which link the community to the event, supremely important, of the Lord’s death and resurrection. Note the variety and yet the similarity in the following list: to die with him — to live with him; to suffer with — to be glorified with; to be crucified with — to be raised with; to be baptized with — to be made alive with; to be buried with — to sit with; to be planted with — to rule with; to be conformed to — to come with.\(^\text{29}\)

The shared reliance on, or faith in, Christ is an indissoluble bond not only with Jesus but with one another as well. The bond through faith in Christ does not simply ignore significant differences to create a community; instead, faith is “viewed as a power that creates communal bonds strong enough to thrive on all the difficulties that had ensued from God’s avowed intention to bring Jews and Gentiles into the same community (Rom 15:7-13).”\(^\text{30}\) The relationships within the church have been empowered and transformed through the fellowship in faith in Christ. The community does not exist of her own doing but rather she has been created and bonded together in a relationship unlike any other.

This unique relationship is expressed particularly as family with one another. In Galatians 4:4-7, Paul explains that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, became the incarnate Son in order to provide adoption as God’s sons to all who believe in Christ. As a result of the common adoption as sons through faith in Jesus, the familial bond of the church is established. Minear points out, “To early Christians nothing was more distinctive of their common life than their existence as sons of God.”\(^\text{31}\) Relating to one another as family is clearly a defining aspect of the internal relationships within the church throughout the New Testament. This family relationship is evidenced through the overwhelmingly common address among believers: brothers and sisters. Minear establishes this point, as

\(^{29}\)Minear, *Images of the Church*, 162-63.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., 142-43.

\(^{31}\)Ibid., 167.
well: “The salutation ‘brothers’ was in the New Testament the most natural (and therefore most quickly conventionalized) way to address fellow Christians or a congregation as a whole.”  

The primary implication of this family relationship is love. A familial relationship with God is marked by love for the family of God (1 John 3:10-11). The call to love one another as Christ has loved us is a consistent theme throughout the New Testament (John 13:34-35, 15:12; Rom 12:10, 13:8; Gal 5:13; Eph 4:2; 1 Thess 4:9; 1 John 3:11, 23, 4:7, 11-12). Casarella claims, “In fact, it is expected of believers that the graciousness of God in granting them a new and purified life should result in mutual love (1 Pet 1:22-2:3) expressed in practical ways (1 Pet 4:8-11, but see 1 Peter more widely).”  

Radical self-giving marks the church as family with one another. Dever maintains that the fellowship in faith is at least in part about “sharing particular points of distinctiveness from the world around them.”  

The family of God is a unique community in several ways: the nature of her bond among her members, the selfless love shown toward one another, the oneness inherently present and expressed through her life, and the holiness of the sons imitating their Father (Eph 5:1-21).

In addition to the New Testament images of the church, a regular pattern that must not be ignored is the use of the word ἀλλήλων. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature defines ἀλλήλων as a reciprocal pronoun meaning “each other, one another, [or] mutually.”  

Often paired with imperatives, ἀλλήλων forms a pattern of one-another commands. These commands flow from the nature of church members’ relationships with one another in Jesus as the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5) and the fellowship in faith, and they provide further insight into the concept of the church as family with one another. Gordan Fee provides a great overview.

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32Minear, Images of the Church, 171.
34Dever, “The Church,” 774.
of the concept and its importance to the nature of God’s people:

This concern for God’s saving a people for His name... is further evidenced by the frequency of one of the prevailing, but frequently overlooked, words in Pauline paraenesis: ἀλλήλων (‘one another/each other’). Everything is done ἀλλήλων. They are members of one another (Rom 12:5; Eph 4:25), who are to build up one another (1 Thes 5:11; Rom 14:19), to care for one another (1 Cor 12:25), to love one another (1 Thes 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thes 1:3; Rom 13:8), to pursue one another’s good (1 Thes 5:15), to bear with one another in love (Eph 4:2); to bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2); to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another (Eph 4:32; cf. Col 3:13), to submit to one another (Eph 5:21), to consider one another better than ourselves (Phil 2:3; cf. Rom 12:10), to be devoted to one another in love (Rom 12:10), to live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16).36

The overarching emphases of these commands throughout the New Testament is the reality of the church’s oneness and the practical implications of that fact through love which manifests itself in a variety of ways. The prominent points throughout this section of oneness, interdependence, unique fellowship in Christ, and mutual love manifest themselves in these one-another commands.

Based upon the images and patterns in the New Testament, one must recognize Guder’s assertion concerning Christianity: “Christian faith is not an individual matter; everything is to be done with and for one another.”37 As the body of Christ, the church enjoys unity in diversity as well as interdependence under the rule and through the life of Jesus. As the fellowship in faith, the church inherently possesses a unique relationship as family with one another that is empowered and transformed through her relationship with Christ to exhibit love toward each other. Ultimately, the visible life of the church in individual churches as family with one another is evidenced in church members obeying the pervasive one-another commands.

Covenantal and Confessional Natures of the Church

As has been evidenced in the New Testament as well as the convictions of the


37Guder, Missional Church, 148.
early church fathers, the church, and, as a result, individual local churches have been formed with the identity of family with one another. Two of Allison’s primary characteristics of the church, the “covenantal” and “confessional” natures, pertain to the particular identity at hand. An understanding of these two natures and the ecclesiological practices that accompany them will develop a richer view of the church as family with one another and provide further vision for the revitalization of local churches.

First, Allison describes the covenantal nature of the church as the kind of relationship that has been established between God and His people as well as between the members of the church. The theme of covenant spans the Scriptures. God relates to humanity through covenants time and again. Covenant relationship is the primary way by which He relates to His people. A covenant is different from a contract which is broken whenever one side fails to meet his or her part of the bargain. Instead, a covenant is an unending agreement between two parties, and in each of the Biblical covenants, God is the initiator who sets the terms. He initiates a covenant with Noah and Abraham. He reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham to Isaac and Jacob.

Later, another kind of covenant based upon law was struck at Mt. Sinai. God’s giving of the law and Israel’s receiving of it bound the nation to God. Clowney remarks, “The tie that binds God’s people to their Lord binds them also to one another. The bond of Israel’s nationhood was not ethnic but religious. It was the covenant at Sinai that forged Israel into unique nationhood. Strangers and sojourners could be admitted to the assembly and people of God. They could gain an inheritance in Israel (Ex. 12:47-49; 23:9).” The covenant community was distinct and bears many similarities to the church as previously discussed. Clowney expresses the character of the old covenant community here:

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38 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 3134-36.
39 Ibid., loc. 3126.
Certainly the servants of the Lord, joined in covenant with him, must live at peace with each other. But the God-centered character of covenental religion required much more. Because God was the Father of Israel, the people were also a family, a ‘fatherdom’. . . . The Psalmist put it eloquently: ‘I am a friend to all who fear you’ (Ps 119:63). . . . To belong to the people of God is to have a share in the inheritance (Dt. 10:9; 12:12; 14:27, 29; 18:1) The New Testament concept of fellowship (koinonia) contains this same thought of sharing, of having in common the blessing, the inheritance given by God. God himself is the inheritance of Israel, the portion of his people (Ps. m 16:5; 73:26; 119:57; 142:5; La. 3:24).\(^{31}\)

The concept of the people of God as a family with one another is not new. Now, the covenant with Abraham is being fulfilled in that every nation is being blessed through participation in God’s family by receiving the Gospel.

Yet, the nature of the covenant established at Mt. Sinai involved blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Deut 28). Israel’s failure to uphold her portion of the covenant signaled the desperate need for a new and better covenant. Thus, God promises a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), and in the New Testament, Jesus declares that He is the fulfillment of the new covenant in which humanity is brought back into relationship with God by grace alone through faith alone in the work of Christ alone (Eph 2:1-10). P. T. Forsyth observes, “To be in Christ is in the same act to be in the church. . . . It puts us into a relation with all saints which we may neglect to our bane but which we cannot destroy.” \(^{42}\) The church is established in a new covenant relationship with God and one another, and three ecclesial practices flow from this fact.

The church has been given two signs of the new covenant: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The signs of the covenant are to display a unity and covenant relationship not only between God and man but also between the members of local churches. These covenant signs are visible pictures of inward realities, and they are intended for the ongoing renewal of local churches. In Ephesians 4:1-6, baptism is one of the unifying factors of the church. Guder argues, “The practice of baptism introduces persons into a


radically new kind of social relationship; no longer isolated individuals, they have become brothers and sisters adopted into the body of Christ to live a communal life as a sign of God’s reign in the midst of human history.” Baptism occurs at the beginning of one’s new life in Christ because it serves as the initiatory rite of the new covenant both in relationship with God and the new covenant community. Since baptism is the initiatory rite of the church, it serves as a prerequisite for participation in both church membership and the second covenant sign, which functions as a regular unifying event in the life of the church.

Jesus establishes the second covenant sign by giving His disciples the Lord’s Supper. After breaking bread as a picture of His body being given for us, He presents the cup and declares, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19-20). The Lord’s Supper is the visible picture of the establishment of the new covenant. Partaking together is an important element of this new covenant sign as the Lord’s Supper reflects not only the relationship accomplished through the cross but also the unity that exists among believers. Paul emphasizes the connection between the Lord’s Supper and unity by referencing the body of Christ of which all believers are a part (1 Cor 10:16-17) and the tragedy of disunity as the Lord’s Supper is practiced (1 Cor 11:17-34). Both of these ordinances emphasize the ongoing covenant relationship and unity that has been accomplished in the church and is intended to be present in local churches. Additionally, similar to the covenant renewal ceremonies under the old covenant, the ordinances are intended for new covenant renewal in the lives of local churches.

Another important practice flowing from the covenantal nature of the church is that Christians covenant together in particular local churches. Jonathan Leeman summarizes this act well: “The church covenants to affirm and oversee the Christian,

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while the Christian covenants to submit to the church’s oversight.” This practice is typically called church membership. When people join a church, a covenant is formed rather than a contract. Christians commit to one another for the good and bad times. Covenanting with a church is an incredibly weighty commitment and cannot be taken lightly. Allison outlines the pattern of covenant making that establishes the weightiness of membership. As God chooses us in election and makes a covenant with us through Jesus, we choose God through faith in Christ and make a covenant with other believers in a local church. As a result of this covenantal paradigm, Leeman stresses that “our doctrine of church membership does not depend on pure voluntarism, decisionism, or consumerism. Christians must choose to join a church as a matter of human responsibility and freedom, but they really have no choice about whether to join a church as a matter of the relationships between faith and deeds. To remain aloof from a local church is to ‘profane the covenant’ (Heb. 10:26–29).” Membership in local churches is essential to the Christian life.

The practice of clearly defining membership in local churches is vital as well. Clowney provides a host of support for clarifying who is in and who is out:

The lists of names in the book of Numbers gives evidence of God’s concern to define membership in his people; God’s book of life is the archetype of the earthly register of his people (Ex. 32:32-33; Mal. 3:16). A prophetic psalm foresees the recording of Gentile names on the roles of Zion (Ps. 87:4-6). The names of Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement, recognized as members of Christ’s body at Philippi, are in the book of life, according to Paul (Phil. 4:2-3). Matthias, chosen in the place of Judas, is numbered with the eleven apostles; those who were added to the church were numbered with the disciples so that the total numbers could be set down (Acts 1:26; 2:41; 4:4).

Maintaining a membership role and committing to a written church covenant are important tools for clarifying who has committed to a particular local church. Charles W.

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Deweese comments, “A church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith.”48 Some might object that church covenants were not present through much of church history, but Allison maintains that the lack of covenants in the Middle Ages and Reformation era makes sense in light of state churches.49 In places where membership is not automatic or forced, written church covenants are not only a helpful tool for cementing commitment among believers but also a picture of the covenant between God and His people. Leeman maintains the latter point: "Another way to explain our membership in or covenant with a local church is to say that it makes the invisible visible—it defines the gospel love of God for the world.”50 Local church membership and the practice of the ordinances highlight and reinforce the covenantal nature of the church as well as further develop her identity as family with one another.

Next, the confessional nature of the church can be summarized through a two-fold meaning of confession. Allison delineates the confessional nature as “both personal confession of faith in Christ and common confession of the historic Christian faith.”51 The church’s unity in faith has been established through the discussion of the fellowship in faith above. In light of the theological foundations having been laid already, a focus upon the confessional practices of the church is necessary.

First, the ordinances of the church are not only covenantal in nature but also confessional. Baptism is a personal confession of faith that identifies and unites one with the church. The Gospel brings unity in the church, and specific Gospel truths are displayed through the act of baptism. The immersion in water of a new believer portrays

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49Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 3212-15.
51Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 3310-11.
the Gospel in several ways. First, both the death of the old self and the identification with Christ’s death are pictured in immersion (Rom 6:4). Second, baptism displays being raised with Christ for new life (Rom 6:4). Third, the commonality of baptism with other believers portrays the unity the church shares in salvation (Rom 6:3). Finally, baptism being an act received from another and performed “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” confesses that the source of our salvation is not in ourselves but in God alone (Matt 28:19), and since self baptism is not practiced, a clear connection and unity with a local community is displayed.

In addition to baptism, the Lord’s Supper confesses our unifying faith. Paul explains that every time the Lord’s supper taken the church "proclaims the Lord’s death” (1 Cor 11:26). Through partaking of communion, a local church declares that her common Savior gave His body and spilled His blood for the sake of providing true life through the forgiveness of our sins. Additionally, eating of one bread confesses our unity as one body (1 Cor 10:17). Both ordinances are a regular practice of unifying confession for God’s people as family with one another.

Another important confessional practice is the adoption and use of formal confessions of faith. Though never commanded in Scripture, the pattern of utilizing formal confessions is evident in the New Testament and church history. Allison confirms, "In terms of the support of Scripture, biblical scholars acknowledge for the most part that in the pages of the New Testament, splices of early church confessions are to be found. One example is in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. After employing the metaphor that the church is a ‘pillar and buttress of the truth’ (1 Tim. 3:15), Paul concludes with a profession of that truth.”52 Another possible example is the Christ hymn of Colossians 1:15-20.53 Historically, groups have gathered to write confessions of faith such as the

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Nicene Creed or Westminster Confession. Allison states that beginning with the early church, “as heresies advanced and challenged orthodox doctrine, general church councils were convened; a particular result of some of these ecumenical councils was a creed, or written confession of faith, such as the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. Historically, as part of the liturgy, Christ-followers have continued (and continue today) to express together this confession (or some other form) of the Christian faith when gathered as the church.”

The practice of writing and adopting confessions for the sake of maintaining unity around orthodoxy is clearly articulated in Scripture and history.

In summary, the ecclesiological foundation of the church, and ipso facto, local churches as family with one another is clearly established in historical, biblical, and systematic theology. The oneness of the church confessed by the writers of the Nicene Creed is not a fantasy or mere desire of the human authors. Rather, the oneness expressed by the early church fathers is established in God as is evidenced by the images and patterns of the New Testament. The body of Christ and fellowship in faith inform our understanding of the church’s identity as family with one another. As family, the people of God are a unified diversity and an interdependent community. The church possesses a unique mutuality and love that is exhibited through a variety of actions articulated through the one-another commands. The community of faith is further defined by God’s covenant with her as a people and as individuals. This covenant establishes the lasting relationship with both God and one another, and the latter relationship is renewed and displayed through three ecclesial practices of the church: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and local church membership. Finally, the family of God is confessional; thus, her unity is enhanced by the practices of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the maintenance of confessions of faith. Each of these aspects of the church as family with one another contributes to the motivation and vision for the revitalization of churches.

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54 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 3378-85.
Revised for Re却alization

The revitalization of churches is often messy and painful, which is not much different from difficult seasons within the typical family. Seeking to maintain and strengthen relationships that have been damaged or distorted requires sacrificial love for the seemingly unlovable and patient endurance through personal attacks and hardships. The process is often slow, and many pastors will face temptations to succumb to disillusionment and indifference or to abandon the work for what appears to be easier places of ministry. In order for churches to experience revitalization, pastors must remain steadfast, hopeful, and full of love for their people. A pastor must have a compelling biblical and theological vision for the revitalization of his church, or the difficulties will overwhelm and send him searching for solutions in all the wrong places. A vision for revitalization is grounded in churches as worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, but a complete vision for revitalization must include an appreciation of the relationships among God’s people as family with one another. Several reasons to commit to and continue in the ministry of revitalization flow from the identity of churches as family, including the goal of oneness, the purposes of the corporate gathering and local church membership, and the value of the entire body of Christ.

The Goal of Oneness

First, a primary characteristic of churches as family with one another is church members’ inherent oneness in Christ. The creation of this oneness possesses a purpose beyond the mere enjoyment of unity. In light of the doxological nature of churches, the goal of oneness in the life of a church is first and foremost the glory of God. The pursuit of the manifestation and experience of oneness in the life of a church must be fueled by a zeal for God’s glory. Clowney declares, “The members of the church are to be built up so that they may build one another up; this is not an end in itself, since the object is that each brother and sister, as well as the church as a whole, may be presented to God to his glory.
Expressing the mutuality and love toward one another that forms core aspects of our oneness is an imitation of our Father for the sake of His glory (Eph 5:1-2). Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. opines, “Maybe when you were growing up, chaos reigned in your family. Maybe the kids and even the parents mouthed off and behaved cruelly. Some families are like that. Some churches are like that too. But God’s household must never be like that. Such behavior denies our Father. He wants us to behave in ways that reveal his heart and who he is.” Additionally, the unity in diversity that is present in the oneness of a church is intended to display the unity in diversity of the Trinity (John 17:20-22). Grudem argues, “Because God in himself has both unity and diversity, it is not surprising that unity and diversity are also reflected in the human relationships has has established. . . . When we see different people doing many different things in the life of a church we ought to thank God that this allows us to gloriﬁy him by reﬂecting something of the unity and diversity of the Trinity.” The glory of the Trinity is at stake in the unity of local churches. Oneness in the life of a church promotes not only healthy witness to a watching world for the glory of God but also deeper love and appreciation for God and the power of the Gospel within the family of God. As the one-another commands are fulﬁlled, believers’ worship will be fueled as sin is confessed, burdens are shared, love is expressed, and forgiveness is experienced.

Also, the covenantal and confessional natures of churches are oriented toward the glory of God. Concerning the covenantal nature, we should revitalize churches because the people have been brought together through covenant with God as well as each other, and the breaking of the covenant with one another is in outright opposition to the idea of a covenant. Clowney maintains that division in the covenant community

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denies the oneness established in the body of Christ. Since part of God’s covenancing with Christians is making them into a people, believers must possess a great deal of love and care for the people God has sought to call His own. To watch His people in a particular locale slowly fade away is tragic. God’s desire for His covenant people is clearly for growth in purity and unity.

The confessional nature entails a doxological orientation as well. The faith in which churches are united is to be confessed not only with our lips but also with our individual and corporate lives. A church with a disconnect between verbal and practical confession fails to glorify God as intended, especially when that disconnect is rooted in the unity of the church. When a church is dying from division, the unity that God brings about through the Gospel is misrepresented to a world that is already in chaos due to a lack of reconciliation. The power of God to reconcile and unify a people is undermined in the eyes of a watching world. If defending the name of our God and the truth of the Gospel is of utmost importance, then we have no other choice but to pursue church revitalization with undying zeal.

**The Purposes of the Corporate Gathering and Church Membership**

The second reason for the pursuit of church revitalization is based upon the purposes of the corporate gathering and local church membership. At least in part, both of these are given to the local church as agents of ongoing renewal and revitalization when needed. Discussing love and unity that is to be present in churches as a result of the Gospel, Ortlund asserts, “Gospel culture is just as sacred as gospel doctrine, and it must be carefully nurtured and preserved in our churches.” The corporate gathering and membership are intended to play various roles in the cultivation and restoration of Gospel culture.

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First, the author of Hebrews clearly connects the corporate gathering to ongoing renewal in the life of a local church (Heb 10:24-25). When gathering as a people, a church is reoriented by Gospel doctrine to Gospel culture. While the corporate gathering is certainly given first and foremost for the collective worship of God, one cannot miss its purpose as a revitalizing agent. The unity of the church is intended to be on display in the local gathering as well as in the ongoing life of a church, and when division creeps in, the corporate gathering is intended to help restore unity. Guder contends:

We assume that our ‘habits of the heart’ — the notions, opinions, commitments, and desires that motivate, order, and guide our lives — are chosen and formed in isolation from other human beings and social realities. Robert Bellah and associates conclude that this view is ‘based on inadequate social science, improvised philosophy, and vacuous theology.’ They assert: ‘We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions but through them. We never get to the bottom of our selves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning.’


Within the corporate gathering, the regular practice of the ordinances, confessions of faith, and even congregational singing (Col 3:16) serve to revitalize not only individual Christians but also whole communities of faith. As churches begin to die, especially from disunity, the ordinances call the church back to unity and thus revitalization. As long as churches are scripturally practicing the Lord’s Supper and baptism, a gracious sign of their covenant commitment and unity is being displayed before them regularly. God has provided these signs not only as reminders of the salvation He has provided but also as a gracious means through which the Spirit works to unite and create life in His church. As a result, the practice of the ordinances are a call to revitalization and a means through which God works to bring about revitalization. The covenant signs should lead Christians to seek to perpetuate the covenant community of which they are a part.
Additionally, corporate confession is meant to cultivate the practical fellowship in faith for which God has created His people. As a confessional people, we have been created to inherently possess a remedy for disunity and heresy. Allison explains, “Corporate confession of sound doctrine can help ward off heresy. Moreover, such confession enables the church to ‘attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (v. 13) so as ‘to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ’ (v. 15).” Ultimately, the corporate confession of faith promotes revitalization through the restoration of unity, and especially in cases of disunity, the ordinances proclaim a call for revitalization. Specifically, the Lord’s Supper is a regular call for the church to examine herself for divisions and to pursue reconciliation in light of the gospel proclaimed in the ordinance (1 Cor 11:27-32).

Furthermore, the importance of local church membership should motivate the pursuit of revitalization. For a church to die or choose to dissolve typically involves the breaking of covenant commitments. Often churches die because individual members have sought their own desires above the well-being of the church with which they covenanted. People leave churches for better preachers or programs, less strife, or the frustration of their plans or ideas for the church. Unfortunately, these reasons are far from biblical reasons to leave a church, and the outlook from which they stem is more in line with the individualistic, consumeristic contractual view of church membership. Describing the act of joining a church as a member, Leeman maintains, “This action certainly involves a commitment, but it’s more than a commitment. It’s a bending or bowing of the whole person around these other people in love. I place my discipleship to Christ under them, and they under me and the others because we love one another with the affection of Christ. We intend to unite and give ourselves to one another.”

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61 Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, locs. 3376-78.

are in this kind of covenant relationship with one another, they should seek to persevere through difficulties and to revitalize their dying congregations. Leeman affirms, “This covenant between a Christian and a local church does not remove a Christian’s responsibilities to other Christians, but it does give a Christian more responsibility over the members of his or her church.” Moreover, he argues,

God uses covenants to do eleven things: to identify a people with himself, to distinguish them from the world, to call them to righteousness, to make them his witness, to display and share in his glory, to identify a people with one another, to act as a testimony for them, to assign responsibilities to every party, to render accountability, to protect his people, and to provide clarity in all these matters. . . . God uses local church membership to do all these things—broadly, to establish his kingdom on earth; specifically, to identify a people with himself for all these purposes.

Revitalization is an effort to manifest these realities in the life of a church once again, and local church membership not only contributes to this process but also produces zeal for its pursuit.

The Value of the Entire Body of Christ

Finally, the images associated with churches as family with one another communicate the significant value placed by God on the entire body of Christ. Matt Schmucker observes, “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. . . . 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.” Based on Jesus’ love for every single member of His flock as well as our bond as brothers and sisters within the church, the struggling, seemingly lost, and unhealthy are to be pursued, and this principle applies to corporate bodies of believers. Our hearts should ache as Jesus’

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64 Ibid., locs. 5352-57.
did for those who have lost their way no matter how dirty, malnourished, or distorted they have become.

Further, the diversity of gifts within churches helps one recognize the value of all of Christ’s body. Garland illustrates, “One person alone, no matter how gifted, cannot play a Beethoven symphony, act a Shakespearian tragedy, or compete against another team. The same is true in the church. It can never be a solo performance.” The value of diversity is apparent for the whole of the church as well. Individual churches will vary in their endowment of gifts from the Spirit both in kind and degree. God equips each church with gifts that enable them to uniquely display His glory and love one another in her particular context. Overall, a diversity of churches is needed. Appreciating the value of this diversity among churches should propel efforts to revitalize churches across the spectrum of giftedness, context, and apparent significance.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the identity given to churches of family with one another and the details of that familial relationship provide remarkable motivation for the revitalization of churches. The oneness asserted in the Nicene Creed grounded in the New Testament image of the body of Christ provides a clear picture of a family whose bonds are vital and secure. The fellowship in faith conveys a deep mutuality which expresses itself in love and ongoing reconciliation. The covenantal and confessional natures of the church exhibit the special nature of the relationships within the church and the forms within which they are to take place. All of these aspects of being family with one another promote a zeal for revitalization due to the following reasons: the goal of oneness, the purposes of the corporate gathering and church membership, and the value of the entire body of Christ.

Next, I will develop and define the identity of the church as missionaries to the

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world. Through an examination of two more creedal marks of the church, several New Testament images and passages, and two final aspects of the nature of the church, the missionary identity will be articulated. This final identity will provide further impetus and vision for the sake of church revitalization.
The call to take the Gospel to the nations is incredibly urgent. If the people of God do not preach the Gospel, those apart from God will never have the opportunity to respond in faith and repentance (Rom 10:13-17). Yet, many churches fail to appreciate the urgency and respond to the call. Recognizing the lack of faithfulness of many churches and the urgency of the mission, many have launched or joined parachurch ministries to accomplish the task. While many of these ministries are doing great work and even working alongside healthy churches, the responsibility for mission falls directly on churches. Unfortunately, dying churches are often in decline because they have ignored their mission. Simply bypassing churches to accomplish the mission God has given His people is not an option because churches possess an identity as missionaries to the world. In light of the widespread decline of churches, fulfilling our mission necessarily involves efforts for the revitalization of churches.

In the following pages, the identity of churches as missionaries to the world will be established through an examination of the historical confession of the church as catholic and apostolic, of the New Testament images of the church, and of the missional and spatio/temporal eschatological natures of the church. Based upon this identity, several reasons for revitalization will be developed including the following: the goal of a church’s witness, the purposes of the corporate gathering and disciple-making, and the stewardship of witness and resources.

**Ecclesiological Foundation**

In order to establish the missionary identity given to churches, I will examine
historical, biblical, and systematic theology concerning the church. Two creedal marks of the church from the Nicene Creed address the missionary identity. Several biblical images applied to the church, such as the new creation, salt of the earth, and light of the world, contribute to one’s understanding of the missionary identity. Lastly, the final two theological characteristics of the church articulated by Allison, the missional and spatio/temporal eschatological natures, complete the overarching understanding of churches as missionaries to the world. This ecclesiological foundation will provide yet another aspect of a compelling biblical vision for the revitalization of churches.

**Nicene Creed: Catholic and Apostolic**

Two of the four creedal marks of the church apply to the missionary identity of churches. First, the catholicity of the church is essentially the universal nature of the church. Since the universality of the church does not mean that everyone is automatically included, what does it mean? Dever explains, “The word ‘catholic’ comes from the Greek word *katholikos*, which means ‘whole, entire, complete, general, universal.’ . . . In one sense, the catholicism of the church is simply its other attributes—unity, holiness, apostolicity—appearing everywhere and anytime there has been a true church or true Christians.”

Clowney articulates the universal or catholic nature of the church as incapable of being “confined to any area nor defend[ing] boundaries. ‘Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city which is to come’ (Heb. 13:14). It is of the very nature of the New Testament church to be scattered among the nations of the world.” The catholic nature of the church is its spreading through the entire world to every people, Jew or Gentile. In light of this definition, Pentecost is essentially the beginning of catholicity.

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3. Ibid., 20.
The witness of the early church fathers confirms the above understanding of catholicity. Allison cites, “For Clement of Alexandria, this catholicity or universal expansion of the church was the subject of Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32).” As the church fulfills her mission, she expands to gather all peoples within her fold. Cyril of Jerusalem writes,

[The church] is called Catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to men’s knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts.

The church is called not only to expand universally but also to teach and apply the Scriptures universally.

In addition to the historical teaching of the early church fathers, the catholicity of the church can be established upon Christological and soteriological grounds. Allison delineates the theological foundation for catholicity in the following:

Furthermore, the church’s potential for universality derives from the perspective of one of the purposes of the atonement: Jesus Christ “is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2: 2; cf. 2 Cor. 5: 17–21). As his “lifting up” (on the cross) was a death for all people (John 12: 32), Jesus Christ is exalted “so that he should receive the worship of all as universal Lord [Phil. 2: 5–11]. If these are the christological and soteriological claims made by Christians, the implied vocation of the church is to catholicity. The ultimate scope of the church cannot properly be less than universal.”

The church is created to expand by bearing the Gospel throughout the whole world to every people. Additional implications include Dever’s observation that churches are not

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to become parachurch ministries. Essentially, churches are to avoid becoming silos of specific racial, social, or generational groups. Catholicity involves movement toward all peoples in mission. Also, catholicity implies that one intent of mission is to bring people into the church. Ignatius insists, “He, therefore, that does not assemble with the church, has even by this manifested his pride, and condemned himself.” Ultimately, the result of a catholic mission is peoples from all nations forming or becoming part of local churches.

The second mark of the church pertaining to mission is her apostolicity. Certainly, embracing the apostolic teaching is the primary intent in this characteristic; yet, the continuation of the apostolic pattern and mission is core to the foundation as well. Wilson agrees, “In the church’s tradition, apostolicity has commonly been understood as obedience to the apostolic mission and the apostolic teaching.” The essence of the word means sent. As inherently apostolic, the church is created with mission built into her identity. Clowney argues, “Mission is not an addendum to the doctrine of the church. It is the calling of the church in the world. If it is neglected or abandoned, the life of the church, not just its work, is threatened.” Churches are not faithful to how God has created them apart from faithfulness as missionaries to the world.

New Testament Images of the Church

Three New Testament images contribute to our understanding of churches as missionaries to the world. First, one of the most prominent images of the church is the

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new creation. This image is rooted in the fact that Jesus is both the creator and redeemer (Col 1:15-20). Understanding the full scope of redemption hinges upon an understanding of creation because God is providentially in control over His creation and intends for humanity to serve a specific purpose from the beginning. Through Jesus, God redeems fallen humanity from rebellion to a renewed purpose as His new creation.

Barry J. Beitzel articulate two important realities regarding the new creation. First, they assert, “The new creation is a present reality, dating from the resurrection of Christ.” The new creation is part of the inaugurated eschatology evident in the New Testament. The church is the “the already” while Christ’s second coming will bring about the new heavens and new earth, “the not yet.” Churches experience the benefits of the inbreaking of God’s new creation having been made His new creation in the current age. Elwell and Beitzel affirm, "Resurrection is not only a future hope for believers but a present reality. . . (Eph 2:5, 6; cf. Col 2:12, 13; 3:1). Consequently, believers are “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10). . . . Its members are already being renewed inwardly (2 Cor 4:16) by the Lord-Spirit according to the glorified image of the last Adam (3:18; 4:4, 6; cf. Rom 8:29; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). And they will bear this same image bodily at his return (1 Cor 15:49).” Churches are to bear good fruit in the form of good works (Col 1:3-12). Second, based upon 1 Corinthians 15:45, Beitzel assert, “The Holy Spirit is the power of the new creation (cf. Heb 6:5).” As seen in Jesus’ sending of His disciples (Matt 28:18-20; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8), the Holy Spirit empowers His people for the sake of mission. Clowney maintains, “The fellowship of the Spirit that binds Christians together also calls and equips them to be Christ’s envoys to the ends of

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13 Ibid., 1545.

14 Ibid., 1546.

15 Ibid., 1545.
the earth.” As the new creation in this age, churches are renewed to do good works in the world and empowered to be witnesses to the nations.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul utilizes the new creation image. Garland argues for a translation of “there is a new creation” which clarifies that the new creation is not simply an individual experience but a communal experience as well. Dever argues similarly, “But the new creation image is corporate as well as individual. In the New Testament, Christ’s resurrection is presented as the first fruits from among the dead (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:20-23). And in his resurrection, the great final resurrection has begun.” The corporate nature of the new creation is important as the following verses establish the mission of God’s new creation as “ambassadors” (2 Cor 5:20). The new creation is individually and corporately endowed with the ministry of reconciliation; thus, churches are created as missionaries to the world.

As the new creation, churches are to be on the move. Part of the imagery communicates an ever-expanding nature. Beale argues that in the original creation, “the intention seems to be that Adam was to widen the boundaries of the Garden in ever increasing circles by extending the order of the garden sanctuary into the inhospitable outer spaces. The outward expansion would include the goal of spreading the glorious presence of God.” The new creation is intended to do the same through disciple-making. The expansion of the new creation is evident in Paul’s thanksgiving for the Colossian church as she is evidence of that expansion (Col 1:6). Minear argues that James is alluding to the expansive nature of the new creation when referring to “first fruits” (1:18) as James’ intent is “not only that ‘we’ are a new creation but also that we


are only the first installment of those whom God has determined to include within that new generation.”

In summary, churches join in the expansion of the new creation through the spread of the message of reconciliation. The ever-widening influence and population of the church is a fulfillment of the original purpose of mankind. Jesus has redeemed a people to fulfill that purpose through spiritual expansion, rather than physical, by the power of the Spirit. Beyond evangelism, the new creation is to bear the fruit of good deeds. Having experienced the initial renewal of God’s new creation in the world, churches grow and bear the fruit of the Spirit in her character and good works.

Furthermore, Jesus applies two images to the people of God in the Sermon on the Mount. We are the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt 5:13-16). Jesus is not simply describing actions of His people but their character as well. Lois Barrett asserts,

> These images suggest that mission is not just what the church *does*; it is what the church *is*. Saltiness is not an action; it is the very character of salt. Similarly, light or a city on a hill need not do anything in order to be seen. So too it is with God’s ‘people sent.’ The visible taste-able nature of their community is their missional purpose: by encountering that ‘holy nation,’ others’ may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven’ (Matt. 5:16). Who the community is and how it lives points to God and is an invitation to join the community in praising God.

The mission of the church is not limited to a particular program or ministry. Churches bear a missionary identity in such a way that everything they do has missional implications. Just as churches cannot simply cease being worshipers or family, the missionary identity is inherent in the whole life of a church whether or not she is living faithfully. Thus, churches are not being only missionaries while evangelizing and only family while encouraging one another. The identities are interrelated because they are part of who we are. Barrett explains, “It means, first of all, that the inner, communal life

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of the church matters for mission. Instead of separating the work of particular congregational communities or the church in general into mission and nurture, the total life of the ‘people sent’ makes a difference to its apostolic witness.”

Each image provides a few more insights into the nature of churches as missionaries to the world. As salt, the people of God function in the world in at least a couple of ways. John Nolland warns against “looking for anything too precise. The main point is that salt has the capacity to benefit in quite fundamental ways.” Nonetheless, he argues that two purposes are clear: “flavouring and preserving.” As Christians live their renewed life in Christ, they will have an effect on the world around them. Following the beatitudes, the image of salt communicates that a people living the beatitudes will actually provide a preservative effect in opposition to the deteriorating effects of sin. As flavoring, Christians should be producers of quality that adds value and enjoyment to the world around us. Kent Hughes illustrates, “Christianity is what brings spice and zest to life. The bland is made savory, and the unpalatable becomes a delight! Believers must be salty not only because they are righteous, but because life is alive. They ought to write the best books, be the most courteous, work the hardest, be the best musicians and artists and craftsmen and students.”

As the light of the world, churches are to live visible lives in such a way that people acknowledge and glorify God. Nolland comments, “The challenge is to live out in the public arena what one is intrinsically. That to which the Matthean Jesus calls is neither private nor to be ghettoised in the Christian community.” The light is intended to be in contrast to the darkness of the world. Leon Morris highlights that churches are not

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23 Ibid.


to be “indistinguishable from the people among whom they live.”

When churches are dying, they often have the opposite effect of what is intended in their nature as light. Rather than drawing unbelievers to Christ through the Gospel, many churches repel unbelievers because nothing distinct or attractive exists within the life of their congregations.

In review, churches are identified in several ways throughout the New Testament that pertain directly to mission. As the new creation, churches are to be an expanding manifestation of God’s new creation in this age through the ministry of reconciliation. As salt and light, they possess two additional identities. We do not just salt things, but we are salt. Jesus is not telling us we should do a certain action as a ministry or program but rather that our entire lives are to be salt and light to the world. This means that the preservative, flavoring, revealing, and drawing effects are to be present in absolutely every sphere of our lives. The Gospel must infiltrate every aspect of our churches so that we might faithfully manifest our identity as missionaries to the world.

**Missional Nature of the Church**

Allison describes the nature of the church in two final ways. She is “missional” and “spatio-temporal/eschatological.”

First, he defines the missional nature as “the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God.” In regards to this missional nature, Guder insists, "It has taken us decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God's sent people." Too often, churches tack missions onto a long list of other ministries that are carried under their purview. Yet, Guder and others have clearly argued

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28 Ibid., locs. 2592-93.

for the missional identity of the church. While this identity is not the primary aspect of
the nature of the church, it is a vital facet for a complete ecclesiology as well as a
powerful call to church revitalization.

Three texts provide the foundation for the missional nature of the church.
Allison begins by citing John 20:21-23 as a vital text for understanding the sent nature of
the church.30 Jesus clearly sends His people into the world for a specific purpose. Though
likened to Jesus being sent by the Father (v. 21), the sending of the church on mission is
not a one-to-one equivalent of Jesus’ mission. Carson remarks, “Just because he ascends
to his Father does not mean he is no longer the ‘sent one’ par excellence (cf. 9:7). Thus
Christ’s disciples do not take over Jesus’ mission; his mission continues and is effective
in their ministry (14:12–14).”31 The overall goal of the book of John also helps us to
understand the primary focus of our mission as witnessing to the work of Christ so that
people might believe and follow Him (John 20:31). Also, the giving of the Spirit, though
symbolic here, is closely tied with the mission of the people of God (v. 22).32 The Spirit
empowers the church to bear witness throughout the world to the forgiveness offered in
the Gospel of Jesus Christ (v. 23). Scholars agree the ability to forgive or withhold
forgiveness is found in the responsibility to preach the Gospel.33 The focus on belief in
the following passages confirm this reading (vv. 24-31).

The sent nature of God’s people by the power of the Spirit is reinforced in Acts
1:8. In addition to the truths established in John’s sending event, the scope of the mission
is captured. The disciples are called to witness from Jerusalem “to the end of the earth.”

30Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, loc. 3473.
32Carson explains, “Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose exegesis, admittedly, varied from the
brilliant to the heretical, argued that v. 22 is to be regarded as a symbolic promise of the gift of the Spirit
later to be given (i.e. at Pentecost).” Ibid., 651.
33See Andreas J. Köstenberger, John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
Also, based upon the record to follow throughout Acts, Polhill explicates the content of the witness as “the earthly ministry of Jesus, above all . . . his resurrection (cf. 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41). As eyewitnesses only they were in the position to be guarantors of the resurrection. But with its root meaning of testimony, ‘witness’ comes to have an almost legal sense of bearing one’s testimony to Christ.”

Though the missional identity of the church entails more than evangelism, the clear priority is specific verbal testimony to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit throughout the world.

Third, the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 is likely the most well-known. In this text, Jesus calls the church to make disciples. A holistic view of mission is captured in the subordinate clauses that follow the call to make disciples. “Baptizing” points to the responsibility to evangelize so that people hear and respond to the Gospel in repentance and belief; yet, the Great Commission extends beyond this responsibility. Craig Blomberg asserts, “Teaching obedience to all of Jesus’ commands forms the heart of disciple making. Evangelism must be holistic. If non-Christians are not hearing the gospel and not being challenged to make a decision for Christ, then the church has disobeyed one part of Jesus’ commission. If new converts are not faithfully and lovingly nurtured in the whole counsel of God’s revelation, then the church has disobeyed the other part.”

The call of the Great Commission is to make whole disciples who bear fruit in the Spirit and continue the process of making disciples of all nations. Unfortunately, the Great Commission has often been reduced to mere evangelism; yet, evangelism is far from the whole call that Jesus places upon His church. Not only does the church take the Gospel to the nations that do not know Jesus but also she must teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded. The totality of the mission must be kept in mind in order to live

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faithfully our identity as missionaries to the world. In order to capture the full picture of the idea behind making disciples, I argue that the mission of the church is to make whole disciples that covenant with and multiply disciples. Both evangelizing unbelievers and discipling believers are essential for making whole disciples.

A full understanding of the Great Commission is incomplete until one addresses the covenanting and multiplying aspects of making disciples. Though not immediately apparent, the covenanting aspect is seen in “baptizing,” and the multiplying aspect is seen in “teaching.” First, baptism is the ordinance of entry into the church. Thus, going against an individualistic view of faith, baptism connects the faith of an individual to a greater body of disciples. Additionally, following the commands of Scripture involves living in a covenant relationship with other believers as local churches. As a result, making disciples results in growing and planting churches. Along these lines, J.D. Payne asserts that church planting “is evangelism resulting in congregationalizing.”

Also, David Hesselgrave argues, “The primary mission of the church and, therefore, of the churches is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and gather believers into local churches were they can be built up in the faith and made effective in service; thus new congregations are to be planted throughout the world.”

The gathering and covenanting together as local churches is a primary end result of disciple-making; yet, multiplication is a vital concept as well. As disciples are taught to obey all that Jesus commanded, they will also be taught the Great Commission; thus, churches are not meant to grow by addition but multiplication: one disciple makes another, and then both begin making disciples, who also make disciples, and so forth. Ultimately, as the teaching aspect of the Great Commission occurs, the hope and expectation is that multiplication will result on the church level as well.

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Having articulated the call to witness and make whole disciples, one final issue must be addressed concerning the missional nature of the church. The relationship of good deeds, or social responsibility, and the verbal proclamation of the gospel must be considered. In Mark 12:29-31, Jesus sums up what it looks like to live in obedience to God and, as a result, gives a picture of a whole disciple: one who loves God and loves others. A whole disciple will be growing in both of these areas as he or she seeks to observe all that Jesus commands. An important issue develops from this assertion. In light of the emphasis upon loving others in the law and as part of the identity of a whole disciple, some argue that the mission of the church to the world can be summarized as loving others, doing good deeds, or being socially responsible. Often, verbal proclamation of the gospel becomes relegated to part of the mission of loving others in order to take part in building the kingdom of God or renewing the world.

In order to gain a holistic Biblical perspective on how social responsibility and gospel proclamation relate, one must begin with a look at a major theme throughout Scripture: the kingdom of God. First, what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom is mentioned time and again in the four Gospels. Jesus is inaugurating the kingdom through His life on this earth. He declares in Mark 1:15 that the kingdom of God has come, and people are called to repent and believe the gospel as a result. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert describe the kingdom as the reign of God in Jesus.\textsuperscript{38} Ultimately, Jesus has come to reestablish the kingdom of God in all the cosmos. Satan is currently ruling on the earth, but Jesus has secured, or inaugurated, His kingdom and will one day manifest it fully and finally by eliminating Satan’s kingdom and bringing in the new heavens and new earth. The kingdom is closely associated with shalom, which is the perfect peace, justice, and love of God. Through reestablishing the kingdom, Jesus will restore shalom. As part of Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom, Jesus has setup His church as the visible

\textsuperscript{38}Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, \textit{What Is the Mission of the Church?} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 127.
manifestation of the kingdom in the present age. DeYoung and Gilbert explain that churches are essentially “the outposts of the Kingdom.” The church exists to display God’s kingdom to the watching world by living kingdom oriented lives under God’s reign (i.e. submitting to Scripture). As the church grows, so grows the footprint of the kingdom of God in our world.

If the kingdom is moving toward the reestablishment of shalom in our world, then should the church also be working for this purpose? An examination of the words used to relate the people of God to the kingdom is important at this point. George Eldon Ladd explains that in the New Testament one never finds humanity building or establishing the kingdom of God. In fact, God is the only one ever to be said to build the kingdom. Nonetheless, we are called into this kingdom movement in other ways. Ladd cites many places in the Gospels in which we are called to enter, receive, inherit, or proclaim the kingdom (Matt 5:4, 20, 7:21, 10:7, 25:34; Mark 9:47, 10:15, 23; Luke 10:9, 18:17). People can even reject the kingdom, but we cannot build it. After entering the kingdom through the message of the kingdom, the gospel, the church is called to proclaim that message. In addition to Ladd’s categories of entering and proclaiming the kingdom, one finds the commands of Scripture to be a call to embody the life of the kingdom (or its shalom). In Colossians 1:13 Paul explains how believers have been transferred to a new kingdom, and in the few verse before that, Paul is calling the believers to live in a manner worthy of the Lord of the kingdom they have just entered (Col 1:10). The Sermon on the Mount, while certainly exposing our sin, points to what a kingdom-embodied life looks like. The embodiment of the kingdom or its message not only has implications before God but also clearly requires social responsibility to the world around us. Jesus makes clear that our love is to be oriented toward the world in word and deed: proclamation and embodiment of the gospel.

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Before delineating the ways in which these two categories relate in the life of the church, each will be further defined and established. First, the proclamation of the gospel, the message of the kingdom, is a clear verbal witness to the gospel. Another word for this is evangelism, which the Lausanne Covenant defined as follows: “Evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.” In Romans 10:13-17 one recognizes the essential nature of the task of evangelism for people to experience salvation. Without people proclaiming the gospel, no one will be saved. Many other passages support the proclamation of the Gospel and clearly call the church to this task. Matthew 28:18-20 calls the church to make disciples which can only be accomplished if proclamation occurs. Second Corinthians 5:17-21 explains that the church has a new identity in Christ: ambassadors of a message of reconciliation. Also, 1 Peter 2:9 explains that the church exists to proclaim the excellencies of God’s glory to the world around us.

In addition to proclamation, embodiment of the kingdom is well-established in Scripture. Embodiment of the kingdom is actively living just, righteous, and loving lives toward the church and the world. Tim Chester provides three primary reasons beyond other points already mentioned. First, God’s character is one of love and justice toward the oppressed. This aspect of His character is seen throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. As believers we are called to imitate the character of our God (Eph 5:1). Second, God’s reign in our lives should establish a growing habit of repentance and fruitful obedience to God’s Word which is filled with commands to love neighbor, care for the orphan, and love the oppressed in tangible ways. Lastly, God’s grace should motivate us to love others as He has loved us.\(^{42}\)


\(^{42}\)Tim Chester, Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 37.
Clearly, the implications of the gospel and the missional nature of the church in relation to the kingdom of God leads the church to two primary acts: proclamation and embodiment of the gospel. Much of what has been delineated so far will come into play for how these two relate in the ongoing life of the church. Five primary ideas characterize this relationship. First, both proclamation and embodiment are pursuing a unified goal. Ultimately, the church has been given one goal: the glory of God. No passage sums it up better than 1 Peter 2:9-12. In the midst of this passage both proclamation and embodiment are called for with the end of God’s glory in view. Additionally, the church exists on mission for the good of mankind (1 Pet 2:12). The kingdom of God is moving toward this same end as well in Revelation 7, which expresses the end of all things that results in a people who are worshipping God from every tongue, tribe, and nation. Thus both proclamation and embodiment of the gospel are intended to result in the glory of God and the good of man.

Second, they are both distinct ideas and acts, and they must remain that way. One will ultimately lose one of the two clear mandates from God, and most likely, one will lose the work of proclamation due to its offensive nature and difficulty for most church members. Third, the church should view evangelism and social responsibility as “both/and” not “either/or.” Both are clearly commanded by Scripture. If both are imperatives, then both are equally necessary. Thus rather than choosing between evangelism and social responsibility, we must strategically plan to do both.

Fourth, there is a priority and centrality of proclamation over embodiment. The basis for priority does not rest upon valuing the spiritual over the physical. Instead, as Keller argues, evangelism gains priority because it deals with the root of all the devastation that flows from sin. As a result, evangelism deals more directly with the eternal while social responsibility, the temporal. Certainly, the temporal realities are not

overlooked by God and should not be overlooked by the church, but evangelism must take priority because of its foundational and eternal impact. Additionally, Chester provides two other reasons to prioritize evangelism. First, social responsibility works to fix things that can be reversed. Evangelism, once responded to, accomplishes a secure salvation for eternity.44 Second, social action should be taken up in coordination with the community outside the church. Evangelism cannot happen in coordination with those who do not uphold the Gospel. Thus the church must prioritize what only she can do.45

While priority is an important concept, the church should not approach evangelism and social responsibility with the same prioritized mindset that most typically do with a to-do-list. In normal situations, one begins with the first item and works his way down the list. If he does not get to the second or third item, then the consequences are not as significant because he accomplished what is of most importance. Nevertheless, the church cannot be satisfied with only pursuing or accomplishing one of the two tasks of mission. Thus centrality must be added to this characteristic of their relationship. Proclamation is the center and core of the mission of the church. Without it, the mission is hollow and no different from anything else the world does. Additionally, context is provided by discussing the relationship in this manner. If central, the work of evangelism necessarily has a context in which it is centralized. The context of evangelism is the embodiment of the gospel.46 This context will help promote and forward evangelism. Although, one should note that the power for the salvation of souls is not found in the context that surrounds the gospel but in the Holy Spirit’s work through the proclamation of the gospel.

Ultimately, three terms for the way in which social responsibility and verbal proclamation relate can be provided. People have termed these in different ways at

44Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 73.

45Ibid.

46Ibid., 74-77.
various times. The Grand Rapids Consultation, a follow up to the Lausanne conference, argued that social responsibility was a “consequence,” “bridge,” and “partner” with evangelism.\textsuperscript{47} Chester asserts that embodiment “can follow, precede, and accompany evangelism.”\textsuperscript{48} Essentially, one can understand the relationship in the following three categories: product, preparation, and partner. First, embodiment of the gospel is the product of evangelism that is received. The fruit of a life that is saved by grace through faith in the work of Christ will be love for God and love for the world in very tangible and socially responsible ways. Second, embodiment can prepare the way for evangelism. Serving people can till the soil of people’s hearts so that they are more willing to listen. The ethos of the speaker often determines whether an audience will give a hearing in the first place. Finally, they can be partners together for the glory of God and the good of mankind. Each will feed the other. Social responsibility or embodiment will complement evangelism, and evangelism will then lead to more people passionately pursuing selfless love as whole disciples.

Certainly, the church should love others as a witness to who Christ is and as an embodiment of the Gospel, but the priority must be on verbal proclamation to make whole disciples. DeYoung argues, “Our role is to bear witness to what Christ has already done. We are not new incarnations of Christ but his representatives offering life in his name, proclaiming his gospel, imploring others to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).”\textsuperscript{49} Thus, the missional nature of the church prioritizes verbal witness to the Gospel in order to make whole disciples. Insofar as good deeds are the product of, preparation for, or partner with the verbal proclamation of the gospel for the glory of God and good of others, churches should pursue them as well.


\textsuperscript{48}Chester, \textit{Good News to the Poor}, 68.

\textsuperscript{49}DeYoung and Gilbert, \textit{What Is the Mission of the Church}, 57.
Spatio-Temporal/Eschatological Nature of the Church

The final aspect of the nature of the church includes its inherent physical presence in both space and time as well as its orientation toward the final fulfillment of redemption at Christ’s return. The spatio-temporal/eschatological nature includes three facets. First, Badcock affirms the spatial reality of the church as he asserts the high value that the local church possesses as the one visible reality of our faith.\textsuperscript{50} As a spatial being, local churches must grapple with the physical realities of their churches. Though a church is certainly not a building, the spatial nature of churches does require a meeting place, and those spaces matter. Michael Farley contends, “It is widely acknowledged that the environment always affects the way that the people of God perceive the theological nature and purpose of corporate worship. Architecture inevitably speaks a theological message that either reinforces or contradicts the content of the liturgy itself.”\textsuperscript{51} A church’s mission will be impacted by the space she utilizes. Most importantly though, churches will typically possess resources as a result of existing as spatial beings. These resources have been given by God to churches to steward for the sake of manifesting each of their identities: worshipers, family, and missionaries.

Second, the temporal reality of churches means that they age and change through time. Allison argues, “Moreover, if the Lord wills, the church will have a future that goes beyond the current manifestation of gathered people.”\textsuperscript{52} Nonetheless, moving into the future as a church cannot be detached from the past. Churches in need of revitalization possess history in their communities that often negatively impacts their effectiveness on mission.\textsuperscript{53} Churches cannot completely disconnect from their past, but

\textsuperscript{50}Gary D. Badcock, \textit{The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 8.


\textsuperscript{52}Allison, \textit{Sojourners and Strangers}, loc. 3686.

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., locs. 3680-3685.
they can overcome any hindrances developed by their history if they recognize the issues.

Relating to the temporal reality, the eschatological nature of the church means that churches move in time toward Christ’s return when people from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship God together (Rev 7:9-10). Additionally, the eschatological nature flows from the new creation image of the church. As in much theological discussion of eschatology, the concept of the “already” and “not yet” reality in which humanity currently lives manifests itself in relation to the church in a specific way. The implications of this aspect of the nature of the church are summed up well by Allison here:

This “already– not yet” reality means that the church must develop realistic expectations of itself. On the one hand, the “already” aspect encourages the church to have high expectations for its worship, obedience, faithfulness, unity, holiness, consecration to the Lord’s will, spiritual fervor, fruitfulness, purity, good decision making, and so forth. To set the bar too low, so to speak, would be an affront to the “already” nature of the church, which has been called by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. . . . On the other hand, the “not yet” aspect cautions the church not to overreach with its expectations; indeed, it warns the church to expect the continual presence of idolatry, disobedience, faithlessness, division, sin, worldliness, lukewarmness, stagnation, immorality, wrong decisions, and the like. To set the bar too high and embrace what some have called an “overrealized eschatology” would fail to reckon with the church as it actually is at this time in the redemptive plan of God.54

Grasping Allison’s biblical assertions is vitally important for understanding this final aspect of the call to church revitalization. Concerning churches as missionaries, the eschatological nature reinforces the concept that churches are the in-breaking of God’s new creation and, as such, bear the responsibility to spread His renewal throughout the world.

To summarize, historical, biblical, and systematic theology affirms that churches are missionaries to the world. Each category has provided specific insights into the full picture of what this identity entails. The catholicity of the church expresses the inclusive nature of the mission. The Gospel is to be taken to all peoples without discrimination, and all people who find their salvation in Christ universally become part

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54 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, 3740-49.
of the church. The apostolic mark of the church acknowledges the sent nature of the church that is further developed in the discussion of the missional nature of the church. Further evidence of the missionary identity is rooted in three images of the church: the new creation, salt, and light. Each image reinforces the fact that churches are inherently missional. The expansive nature of the church’s mission is manifested in the new creation image, and the renewing character of the church is seen in the salt and light imagery. Next, through the discussion of the missional nature, the missionary task becomes evident: make disciples by the power of the Spirit through the sharing of the Gospel. Finally, the spatio-temporal/eschatological nature exhibits the missional impact of both a church’s physical resources and the historical position. This ecclesiological foundation of churches as missionaries to the world provides further vision and reasons for the revitalization of churches.

**Reasons for Revitalization**

The third primary identity of churches has been identified. As missionaries to the world, churches are sent to all peoples to proclaim and display the Gospel for the expansion of God’s glory and renewal. Additionally, they are equipped with resources and positioned in unique historical contexts for the furtherance of their mission. This identity advances several reasons for pursuing the revitalization of churches. Specifically, these reasons include the following: the goal of witness, the purposes of the corporate gathering and disciple-making, and the stewardship of witness and resources.

**The Goal of Witness**

First, the goal of our witness as missionaries to the world is to clearly and accurately proclaim and display the Gospel to the world so that others will be drawn into the worship of God. Once again, the doxological nature orients the church toward God’s glory. In this instance, the witness of the church exists to enlarge the population of worshipers of God for His glory and others’ good. Witness has the distinct goal of
drawing others into the glorification of God. As light of the world, churches are to do good so that others will join in glorifying God (Matt 5:14-16; cf. Pet 2:12). As the new creation, God’s intention in this age is to expand His redemptive rule and reign through churches by their witness to the Gospel. Also, closely tied to the new creation, the temple imagery also confirms this expansive purpose. Beale reasons,

The nature of our sacrifices as obedient Adamic-like priests is vitally linked to the idea of expanding the sacred sphere of God’s presence in order that others would experience it and come into the sacred temple themselves. Believers are priests in that they serve as mediators between God and the unbelieving world. When unbelievers accept the church’s mediating witness, they not only come into God’s presence, but they begin to participate themselves as mediating priests who witness. As priests, we should make sure that we ourselves are growing in the experience of the divine presence.55 Churches are to serve as mediating priestly witnesses to the world so that they might unite for worship. The witness of God’s people has always been intended to bear significant impact in the world which is why many of Israel’s leaders based their intercession upon it. Clowney describes, “When Israel rebelled in the wilderness, Moses pleaded with God to withhold his judgment so that the Egyptians would not mock God’s deliverance (Dt. 9:28f.). Joshua made the same plea when Israel suffered defeat in Canaan: ‘What will you do for your great name’? (Jos. 7:9)”56 The power of the witness of God’s people remains today.

Unfortunately, churches that are dying are actively working against the clear and accurate proclamation and display of the Gospel. Their witness repels the world, not because of the offense of the Gospel, but because of the host of ways they fall short of faithful witness. Bobby Jamieson explains, “When churches languish in sin and division and nominalism, God’s name becomes a byword in the community. Such churches


slander the name of God, rather than adorning and magnifying it.”

The visible witness of a church undermines any verbal message being proclaimed. When lacking holiness, churches are denying the seriousness of sin. When lacking unity, churches deny the reconciling power of the Gospel. Guder agrees, “In North America, what might it mean for the church to be such a city on a hill? to be salt? to be a light to the world? It means, first of all, that the inner, communal life of the church matters for mission.” When churches lack catholicity in the form of racism, nationalism, or socio-economic favoritism, they are denying the universal offer of salvation. When a church lacks apostolic movement to the world, she denies the urgency of response to the Gospel. Dying churches undermine the goal of witness to draw people into the worship of God. The more unhealthy a church or churches are in a particular community, the more difficult the missional task. God intends for the life of the church to be an apologetic for the Gospel, but many churches are repelling people from the Gospel instead.

Yet, thriving churches promote the goal of witness. When living faithfully as missionaries to the world, churches actively move toward their eschatological end: an ingathering of the nations for the worship of God (Rev 7:9-10). Wilson contends, “I am convinced that the greatest threat to the faithful witness bearing of the church is the absence of vibrant and vital practices of the gospel. When the life of the church is alive with practices faithful to the gospel, the witness of the church simply has to point to those practices. ‘You want to know what the love [mercy, grace, forgiveness] of Christ means? Well, take a look at that relationship’ or ‘that congregation.’” When a church is living holy lives, the contrast of light to darkness is clear, and this distinction will cause people to at least take note. When the reconciling power of the Gospel is proclaimed in word and deed through a church living out her identity as family with one another, people are


58 Guder, Missional Church, 128.

59 Wilson, Why Church Matters, 11.
drawn to the unique oneness, mutuality, and love. Ortlund suggests, “A gospel-defined church is a prophetic sign that points beyond itself. It is a model home of the new neighborhood Christ is building for eternity. People can walk into this kind of church right now to see human beauty that will last forever. Such a church makes heaven real to people on earth so that they can put their faith in Christ now, while they still have the chance.”60 When a church embraces all people without discrimination and actively proclaims the Gospel, people will notice the availability and urgency of the Gospel message.

Churches must be revitalized for the sake of expanding the reach of the Gospel for the glory of God and the good of the nations. Every church that is restored to health provides a greater positive impact to the witness of God’s church in the world. Suddenly, rather than a negative force against the witness of the Gospel in a particular community, a positive force exists. The gains are multiplicative rather than merely additional as through the planting of churches. The more often revitalization occurs, the more beautiful and attractive the witness of the church becomes.

The Purposes of the Corporate Gathering and Disciple-Making

Second, the purposes inherent in the corporate gathering and the call to make disciples promote a vision for the revitalization of churches. While first and foremost an event for worship and secondarily an encouragement for a church’s family life, the corporate gathering is a missional event as well. Considering churches are created as missionaries to the world, churches never stop manifesting their missional nature in some shape or form. The corporate gathering is missional in two ways. First, the gathering displays the glory of God and the unity of the saints in a variety of forms to a watching world. Clowney confirms, “The witness of Christ’s church to the world is not expressed

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only in the going of Christ’s disciples to the ends of the earth. The outgoing, centrifugal mission of the New Testament church does not simply replace the ingathering, centripetal movement of the Old Testament witness. . . . Our local assemblies therefore become Mount Zion in miniature. Israel’s calling to show the world the holiness of the true people of God is maintained and deepened.”

Second, since the Gospel is not only the source for justification, but also sanctification, the weekly preaching event should always articulate the Gospel; thus, the weekly gathering is evangelistic. Also, the Lord’s Supper and baptism not only promote worship and unity but also bear witness to the world. The songs and readings contribute, too, as any unbeliever sitting in a healthy corporate gathering will both see and hear the Gospel. Nevertheless, when churches are dying, their corporate gatherings are often anemic and bear poor witness to the Gospel. Revitalization should be pursued for the sake of redeeming a key missional event. Additionally, churches have been given the weekly corporate gathering, in part, as an ongoing reminder to live as missionaries in the world. Guder argues that every worship gathering is “a sending event.” Churches have been given a tool for the sake of revitalization in the form of their weekly gatherings.

Moreover, the purpose of disciple-making according to the Great Commission is not merely evangelism. The purpose is the development of whole disciples. John R. Mott captures this point well: "The evangelization of the world in this generation should not be regarded as an end in itself. The church will not have fulfilled her task when the Gospel has been preached to all men. Such evangelization must be followed by the baptism of converts, by their organization into churches, by building them up in knowledge, faith and character, and by enlisting and training them for service.” A movement for the revitalization of churches is subverted by an incomplete understanding

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62Guder, Missional Church, 243.
of the purpose of disciple-making. M. David Sills distinguishes between two mission theologies. He expounds, “Some missionaries and missions agencies seek not only to sow the seed but also to bring in the harvest of those who are coming to Christ in responsive areas. . . . [Others] emphasize a search theology, which seeks to find and evangelize the pockets of peoples where no one has ever preached Christ. They build relationships, evangelize, and reach the unreached, only to leave as quickly as possible to reach others who have never heard the gospel.” The limitation of a search theology is a mistake as it fails to take into account the full scope of the Great Commission: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Making disciples is not less than evangelism, but it is most certainly more. Sills asserts, “We must not relegate pastoral training, theological education, and biblical teaching to a level of less important missions activity when they are a primary and necessary means for the fulfilling of the Great Commission.”

The tasks of training and strengthening disciples in Christ is essential to making disciples as Jesus articulated in Matthew 28. Within dying churches, hosts of weak and unhealthy disciples sit week after week. Though, as the author of Hebrews explains, they should be mature, many still require spiritual “milk” (Heb 5:12-13). We cannot be satisfied with merely evangelism, but we must pursue church revitalization for the sake of developing whole disciples from underfed, spiritually-frail believers. A movement of revitalization is vital for the sake of accomplishing our mission as disciple-makers. Pastors are needed for revitalization efforts so that weak disciples might be made whole and other disciples might be sent to multiply whole followers of Christ.

The Stewardship of Witness and Resources

Finally, the revitalization of churches should be pursued for the sake of faithful

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64 Michael David Sills, Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010), 105-6.

65 Ibid., 30.
stewardship of witness and resources. The opportunity to revitalize a church is an
opportunity to steward a Gospel witness to two particular audiences that a dying church
woefully neglects. Matt Schmucker identifies these two audiences as “the nominal
Christian” and “the neighbor.” In many dying churches, the pews are filled with people
who think they have a secure eternal destiny in heaven, but few can articulate the Gospel.
Some would cite their faithful attendance and giving as reasons for their confidence, and
with little evidence of fruit, others cite a conversion experience from their childhood. A
pastor who chooses to serve in a dying church will have the opportunity to regularly
share the Gospel with unbelievers sitting in his own congregation. As for the neighbor,
Schmucker recounts, “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.” Both audiences are a significant
stewardship offered to pastors who would carry the mantle of church revitalization.

Additionally, the spatio-temporal/eschatological nature of the church points to
another stewardship: physical resources. We should revitalize churches because most
churches have been granted physical worldly resources by God that should be stewarded
well, and churches are created by the Spirit to have temporal existence beyond the life of
the current generation. As one considers the spatial nature of the church in local churches,
the reality of physical resources becomes necessary. Time and again in the Gospels (for
example, Matt 25:14-30 and Luke 12:42-46), Jesus calls for good stewardship. In order to
claim good stewardship of the physical resources of dying churches with any integrity,
efforts for revitalization of some kind must be attempted. Also, dying churches hinder the

Schmucker defines a nominal Christian as a “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).” Essentially, the nominal Christian claims the name Christian but lacks true faith.

67Ibid.
mission effort while revived churches funnel resources toward the mission and advance the cause. From a very practical standpoint, as churches are realigned with the identities that God has given them, increasing health and growth will lead to more financial and people resources to pour into forwarding the Kingdom of God locally and denominationally. Some might argue that the resources expended to revitalize are much more than the resources gained in the end, but in light of the other reasons for the necessity of revitalization, the resources that are redeemed in the end are an extra plus and could, over time, actually be greater than the expenditure of initial resources used to revitalize a particular congregation. Furthermore, the temporal aspect of the church should lead current church members to consider the legacy they are leaving beyond their lifespan. The attitude of some elderly members that seeks to maintain the status quo for the sake of comfort without concern for the lasting legacy of their church produces an incredibly poor stewardship of one’s legacy. Church revitalization should be pursued for the sake of the reclamation of physical resources with which God has blessed His people as well as for a legacy that lasts beyond the lifespan of the current generation.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, as missionaries to the world, pastors and churches should pursue revitalization of dying congregations. Each aspect of churches’ inherent missional identity spawns a call for church revitalization that must be heeded. Since the church is missional by its very nature, individual churches will manifest mission in some way even if that is terribly distorted. Some will pursue the mission of personal comfort in creating their ideal social club. Others will pursue social justice to the neglect of the whole mission of the church. Certainly, social justice is a worthy endeavor, but if this is the only pursuit of a church, then the mission has been greatly distorted. These distortions not only lead to much church death but also undermine the mission of the church as a whole. A united people of God on mission together is much more powerful than splintered
churches and denominations going after various goals that change as quickly as the seasons. Our existence as missionaries to the world and a commitment to fulfilling that mission should propel a zealous effort for the revitalization of churches.

Having explored the identity that churches bear as God’s people and the resultant reasons for pursuing revitalization, our attention will now turn to the ongoing necessity of revitalization ministry. The need for revitalization is not limited to the current situation in North America as thousands of churches die each year. The problem is not unique to any particular time or place as an ongoing need for revitalization of churches will always exist until Jesus returns. This reality will be seen in the cyclical renewal in the Old Testament and Paul’s ministry of strengthening churches. Then, through an overview of Revelation, the cosmic reality of spiritual warfare and Jesus’ pursuit of revitalization in several churches will establish the ongoing need for revitalization and provide a basic framework for ministering to dying churches.
CHAPTER 5
ONGOING NECESSITY OF REVITALIZATION

With the motivation for revitalization firmly established in the inherent identities of churches, one key piece remains. A lasting, compelling vision requires not only a clear motivation but also a clear need. Thus, a compelling biblical vision for the revitalization of churches must exhibit its ongoing necessity. Certainly, the observation of a dying church is evidence enough of the need in an individual community or congregation, and the need for a movement of revitalization is evident from the present situation in North America. Nonetheless, the need for an ongoing movement of revitalization is required not merely by the present crisis. If the need for revitalization is distinctive for churches in North America, or in a particular era of history, then surely, if we would revitalize for a season and plant healthy churches in the first place, we would reach a point that revitalization would no longer be needed. But, the reality is that until Christ returns, the need for revitalization will continue to exist. The ongoing necessity of a movement of church revitalization is based upon the overarching biblical pattern of renewal, and especially, the realities of our current position in redemptive history.

In the following pages, the ongoing necessity of revitalization will be demonstrated through an examination of the biblical pattern in the Old Testament cycles of renewal and Paul’s ministry of strengthening churches. Then, through a study in Revelation of spiritual warfare and Jesus’ letters to the churches, the ongoing necessity of revitalization will be firmly established in the current realities of the church age, and a basic biblical framework for the work of this ongoing ministry will be articulated.
The Overarching Biblical Pattern of Renewal

In order to ground the argument for the ongoing need for revitalization, a brief overview of the ebb and flow of God’s people throughout biblical history is in order. Addressing the cycles of disbelief and disobedience of Israel and God’s renewal that often followed, a clear pattern will be established. Although significant changes occur at Pentecost, the need for ongoing renewal continues in the New Testament as evidenced by the apostle Paul’s ministry of strengthening churches. The overarching biblical pattern of renewal is the first step in establishing an expectation of the ongoing need for the revitalization of churches.

Cyclical Nature of Old Testament Renewal

A pattern of renewal in the history of Israel is seen throughout the Old Testament. Richard Lovelace argues that revitalization or renewal is a key theme in Scripture overall. He asserts, “It appears that the recovery of apostate bodies is not only a possibility according to biblical teaching but that it is in fact the central theme of the history of redemption. The families that fall away from the Abrahamic covenant line and fan out to form the gentile world are not lost in total or perpetual apostasy.”¹ This theme is seen in the life of Israel at least as early as the events of the book of Numbers. The pattern of disbelief and disobedience followed by judgment, eventual repentance, and restoration is seen time and again in the complaints of Israel concerning food and water (11), rebellion against leadership (12), refusal to enter the promised land (13-14), and Korah’s rebellion (16-17). I. Hart summarizes, “The theological pattern which emerges in Numbers, i.e. harmony between God and Israel, followed by unbelief and disobedience, followed by God’s judgment, followed by God once again working graciously with Israel to fulfill His promises to them, repeats itself over a much longer time frame in the

¹Richard F. Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 302.
subsequent history of Israel.” Beyond the book of Numbers, a host of examples of rebellion and decline can be cited from the failure to conquer all the nations in Joshua and the demand for a king in 1 Samuel to the numerous examples of idolatry and disobedience throughout 1 and 2 Kings. Additionally, numerous instances of renewal can be referenced. Martin Manser provides a few: “The renewal of Israel Eze 37:1-14. See also Jer 31:31-34; La 5:21; Eze 11:17-20; 36:24-28; Joel 2:28-32. Examples of national renewal 2 Ch 34:29-33. See also Jos 24:1,14-27; Ezr 10:1-4; Ne 10:28-29.”

Nevertheless, our attention will focus on the book of Judges as this era of Israel’s history provides the clearest evidence of an ongoing pattern and need for renewal among God’s people. James M. Hamilton writes, “God’s glorious justice, which is followed by his merciful salvation, is the story told through these accounts [of the judges].” Repeatedly throughout Judges, the nation rebels, and God sends a judge to bring restoration to His people. Lovelace highlights the full pattern concisely: “The cyclical pattern thus established in Judges — (1) appearance of a new generation, (2) popular apostasy and enculturation, (3) national affliction, (4) popular repentance and agonized prayer and (5) the raising up of new leadership and restoration—is repeated again and again during the rest of the book of Judges.” Unfortunately, the pattern is not one step back and two steps forward. Gregory Wong remarks, “If one is to sum up the author’s portrayal of this period of Israel’s history with a single phrase, it would be ‘progressive deterioration.’” Exhibiting the need for an ultimate redeemer and more

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5Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 63.

extensive restoration, Israel does not become increasingly more holy as believers and churches hopefully do today through progressive sanctification, but she deteriorates slowly over time despite experiencing short bursts of renewal.

Further examination of the pattern in Judges exposes two primary causes for spiritual decline, which Lovelace designates the “powers of darkness” and the “generation gap.” The powers of darkness are the forces involved in the underlying spiritual warfare evident throughout Scripture. These are the forces that work against the development of faithfulness among the people of God. The generation gap is experienced when a movement of renewal affects a particular generation, but the following generation did not experience the renewal and moves slowly but surely away from the vigor of the former generation. Thus, Lovelace insists that “a general principle concerning the deliverance of God’s people is being hinted at [in the book of Judges]: redemption comes under the direction of leaders whom God raises up in his sovereign mercy in response to the deep longing and intercession of the laity generated under the pressure of defeat or suffering.” Certainly, this principle points forward to Jesus as the leader who can not only lead to generational renewal but also ultimate redemption.

Yet, if Jesus has come and accomplished redemption and victory through the cross, should not the pattern end in the church age? Lovelace addresses this question:

Why don’t the cycles end now, as God’s people are led into a steady conquest of the occupying powers? But even under the New Covenant, with an eternal and infinitely perfect leader, the people of God cannot expect to prevail unless they follow that leader. What is involved in the church’s periods of recession is something deeper, however, than simple refusal to follow or obey its divine leader. The redemptive work of Christ did not consist in a magnified regent issuing a clearer set of laws to follow. Redemption is participatory, not imitative. It is grounded on grace appropriated through faith, not merely on obedience. Spiritual life flows out of union with Christ, not merely imitation of Christ. When any essential dimensions of what it means to be in Christ are obscured in the church’s

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7Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 62-68.
8Ibid., 65.
understanding, there is no guarantee that the people of God will strive toward and experience fullness of life.\(^9\)

Unfortunately, the pattern does continue for many of the same underlying reasons; thus, the need for ongoing revitalization of churches exists. Nonetheless, churches have been equipped with greater power and hope for renewal. Bruce A. Ware explains, “At the present, however, the struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil goes on, but it does so with the resources of new-covenant provision to enable holiness and obedience not possible prior to the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit.”\(^10\) As a result of this discontinuity with Israel, the church as the true people of God will persevere and not succumb to the same fate.\(^11\) Nonetheless, as seen in the letters of Revelation 2-3, there will be cases in which whole local churches require revitalization due to similar factors that faced national Israel, and they will either pursue and experience revitalization or fail to persevere and experience God’s judgment.

**Paul’s Ministry of Strengthening Churches**

Next, the pattern of need for ongoing renewal is not limited to the people of God under the old covenant but continues under the new covenant as made evident in Paul’s ministry of strengthening churches. Based in large part upon the ministry of Paul, Jamieson contends, “Church revitalization—bringing life to dying churches by dealing with the causes of decline and building toward faithfulness—is a biblical burden. That is, when we see these churches acting as anti-witnesses to Christ, we should, according to

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\(^9\) Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 73-74.

\(^{10}\) Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 94-95.

\(^{11}\) Edmund P. Clowney writes, “Sadly, the chosen people prove themselves unworthy of God’s favor, God’s judgment is immeasurably more severe because of the privilege that Israel despised and forfeited. The adulterous wife will be stoned (Ezk. 16:40); the rebellious son will be cast out (Ho. 11:1, 8; 12:14; 13:1); the pleasant vineyard will be laid waste (Is. 5:5, 6); the planted vine will be uprooted and burned (Ezk. 19:10-14; Ps.m 80:12-16). Redemptive history in the Old Testament is full of the realization of these dire predictions.” Edmund P. Clowney, “The Biblical Theology of the Church,” *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1987), 29.
Scripture, have a burden to do something about it.” This brief overview of Paul’s strengthening ministry will further establish the ongoing need for revitalization.

Though Paul’s ministry involved a significant emphasis upon church planting, he also spent extensive energy “strengthening” churches (Acts 14:22; 15:41; 18:23). Certainly, this ministry included the development of churches that were reasonably healthy. In Brandon Conner’s dissertation concerning Paul’s strengthening ministry, he cites examples of investment in overall healthy churches and identifies this work as the “proactive approach” to revitalization. The proactive approach is clearly a valid endeavor. Recognizing the need for proactivity, the Puritans and Pietists believed that “their primary responsibility was to be ecclesia reformata simper reformanda, a reformed church always reforming.” Yet, proactive strengthening of already healthy churches is simply not revitalization.

Even still, the ministry of Paul does provide evidence for the ongoing ministry of true revitalization. Conner defines Paul’s work of strengthening unhealthy or declining churches as the “reactive approach” to revitalization, and he highlights the letters to the churches in Galatia and Corinth as examples of intense attempts to revitalize those unhealthy congregations. In the case of the Galatians, the spiritual decline was the result of a distortion of the Gospel. Based upon Paul’s introduction (1:6-9), John B. Polhill comments, “‘Some people’ (indefinite) were throwing the Galatians into confusion, attempting to pervert the gospel (v. 7). And the Galatians were following their lead! Employing military language, Paul said that they were ‘deserting’ their calling in Christ (v. 6). . . . Here at the outset, he stated what really had him concerned about the Galatians.

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14Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 52.

15Conner, “Church Revitalization,” 53-56.
they were abandoning their original Christian calling for a false gospel.”16 Paul was seeking to reclaim the church at Galatia through revitalization rooted in recovery of the true Gospel.17

Also, Paul seeks to revitalize the congregation at Corinth through his letters as well as visits (1 Cor 4:19; 16:5-8; 2 Cor 2:1; 12:14; 13:1). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul sought to treat several divergences.18 W. Harold Mare summarizes:

These aberrations included false views of the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15), incest, adultery, and other sexual immorality (1 Cor 5). They also included unchristian actions in taking fellow Christians to court (1 Cor 6), misuse of Christian liberty (1 Cor 8 and 10), disorders in observing the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34) and other disorders in the worship service (1 Cor 14).19

Paul was seeking to correct a decline in holiness and oneness within the church at Corinth. His efforts in relation to the churches at Corinth and Galatia were ministries of revitalization. Paul’s revitalization of churches exhibits the continuing need for ongoing renewal in the life of God’s people, especially in the form of intense revitalization efforts. His efforts also provide an apostolic pattern that not only includes church planting but also church revitalization.

**Revitalization in Revelation**

Paul’s work was necessary not because these churches were aberrations, but, in large part, because the same spiritual environment exists today as in the Old Testament. Paul recognized Satan’s desires to keep unbelievers following him (Eph 2:1-3), ensure unbelievers remain blind and perish (2 Cor 4:3-4), and prevent unbelievers from receiving redemption (Col 1:13-14).20 Thus, an ongoing ministry of strengthening healthy

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17Conner, “Church Revitalization,” 56.
18Ibid., 54.
churches as well as revitalizing dying churches is essential.

Now, turning to the book of Revelation, the cosmic reality of spiritual warfare and the ongoing pursuit of revitalization that must occur due to that reality will be examined. The dire need for revitalization is a direct result of spiritual warfare. Considering Scripture’s emphasis on spiritual warfare, Jerry Rankin asserts, “It is obvious that Satan is diametrically opposed to Christ, to the church, to the extension of God's kingdom, and to individual Christians.”21 An enemy of God and His church rules over this world and seeks to “devour” God’s people (1 Pet 5:8-9). Churches are constantly under attack from the evil one, and in the present age, some will falter because of these attacks. Thus, the reality of spiritual warfare establishes an expectation that churches will need to be revitalized, and this reality is never clearer than in Revelation.

The Underlying Cosmic Reality: Spiritual Warfare

John Battle asserts, “One cannot read the book of Revelation without noticing the preponderance of warfare and related ideas. While much of the warfare is described in physical terms, the spiritual foundation for it is clear. The book has two major related themes: first, Christ will overcome all evil powers; and second, we should therefore endure and overcome.”22 The cosmic scope of spiritual warfare is apparent in Revelation, and this cosmic reality has immense implications for local churches. The following two sections will develop the cosmic scope of spiritual warfare that is presented in Revelation.

The enemy's present reality and ultimate destiny. The best place to begin a study of spiritual warfare is to consider the enemy who is the source of the conflict and of evil itself. Thus, the present reality of the enemy will be discussed by considering the


identity of the enemy as portrayed in Revelation, his vendetta against Christ and the church, and his strategies to destroy the church. Then, the ultimate destiny of God’s enemy will be outlined as the ultimate end of this spiritual conflict is a vital consideration for how the battle is to be fought today.

John provides a substantial picture of the enemy as he depicts him in various ways throughout Revelation. First, in Revelation 12:9, Satan is described as a dragon. Robert Lightner emphasizes the great power and destructive force that this image communicates.23 Certainly, John intends to portray the enemy as a fierce and powerful being. Nevertheless, even in the midst of this passage, the finite power of Satan is made apparent as the dragon is thrown down to the earth. Another important aspect of this imagery is that John connects the dragon and the serpent of Genesis 3. Both seek to undermine and destroy God’s work. This dragon is not a new enemy but is the same enemy who has been fighting against the Lord and His purposes from the beginning. Satan is both powerful and thoroughly committed to destroying God and his people.

Two other conclusions concerning the identity of God’s enemy can be drawn from Revelation 12:9-10. First, just as the ancient serpent used deceit in the garden, God’s enemy in Revelation is described as “the deceiver of the whole world.” Satan as deceiver is a theme that can be seen throughout Scripture, especially Revelation. Not only does John describe the deceitfulness of the dragon but also as he describes the two beasts controlled by Satan in chapter thirteen, he presents them as inherently deceitful (Rev 13:14). From this evidence alone, one can conclude that the enemy of God is at his core deceitful. The second identity affirmed in this passage is Satan as accuser. In verse ten, John describes the work of the enemy as an accuser of the people of God. Although this ability to accuse the people of God is stripped from him and evidences his defeat, this is an identity that has characterized the enemy throughout the Old Testament. Sydney Page

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argues that this is one of the few clear identities of Satan in the Old Testament. As will be seen in considering Satan’s vendetta against Christ and the church, the stripping of his accusatory power is a major motivation for increased attacks in other ways.

The enemy manifests his attack against God’s kingdom in the form of two beasts in Revelation 13. The first beast is identified by Grant Osbourne and many others as the antichrist discussed by both Jesus in the gospels and Paul in his epistles. According to Revelation 13:7, the first beast has authority over the entire world. Robert Mounce argues that the beast represents the evil power of this world that is against the church, and then, he describes the second beast as the false prophet who represents the evil at work in convincing men to worship false idols. As agents of Satan, these two beasts are focused on attacking God and His people through various means.

Next, in light of the first beast’s authority over the world and other New Testament passages describing the enemy, Satan is ultimately the free ruler over this present world. Certainly, amillenialists treat this differently because they argue that the millennium is spiritual and Satan is now bound. Yet, this interpretation concerning the binding of Satan does not seem in line with the rest of Scripture or the reality in which we live. Satan cannot be bound if he is prowling around like a roaring lion as Peter portrays. In Lightner’s discussion of Satan, he asserts that Satan is not bound during this age and is not meant to be bound. Clearly, Revelation portrays Satan as freely moving throughout the earth attacking the kingdom of God. The ultimate binding of Satan will come with the millennial reign of Christ that is described in Revelation 20. Presently, many assert that one should seek to bind Satan and demons as part of spiritual warfare. However,


Revelation gives no indication that there should be any ministry of binding Satan or demons; instead, Christ promises to do that one day in the future. Nonetheless, Satan’s present identity includes ruler of this world, and an awareness of this fact is vital for understanding spiritual warfare.

Finally, while Satan is the ultimate enemy of God, he is not the only being standing in opposition to God. John discusses two groups that fight alongside Satan: demons and the synagogue of Satan. Demons carry out plagues and wage war against the kingdom of God in Revelation 9:1-11 and 16:14. As evidenced in those passages, these fallen angels are powerful beings working to destroy God’s kingdom. The synagogue of Satan is referred to in two letters to the churches. This group is made up of Jews who are falsely accusing Christians. Mark Bredin argues that the synagogue of Satan slandered the church because Christians would not pay the tax placed upon Jews that allowed them to practice their religion, which led to their persecution.28 The synagogue is part of Satan’s kingdom as persecuting the church is a very apparent work of His kingdom throughout Revelation.

Now that the identity of Satan and his kingdom has been traced through Revelation, one should consider what this book has to say concerning the goals of this kingdom. Rankin summarizes Satan’s purposes well:

Basically it's about vengefulness. Satan has been defeated. He has been thrown out of heaven. One day he will be cast into outer darkness, and all his wickedness and deceit will be finished forever. . . . Meanwhile he is trying to thwart God's purpose to be exalted among the nations and to delay His kingdom being extended to the ends of the earth. . . . He is especially elated when he can get those of us who are God's possession, a holy people, to fail to reflect the excellencies of His glory in our lives. . . . In vengefulness he seeks to embarrass God through our failure and carnal living.29

The dragon’s reaction to being thrown out of heaven undoubtedly exhibits Rankin’s assertions. His immediate reaction is to pursue the woman and then seek to destroy her

29Rankin, Spiritual Warfare, 34.
offspring. This goal can also be seen in the attacks from the first and second beasts. Ultimately, Satan will do anything within his power to destroy God’s people. He seeks revenge on the one who has defeated him. Thus, the powerful, deceiving ruler of this world has one main purpose: destroy the church as vengeance against God.

In light of that, what are Satan’s strategies to destroy the church? Rankin and Stetzer group his strategies into two categories: external and internal. The internal is specific to the temptations of the flesh while the external includes the influence of the world and other groups. The attacks are typically made of both. The discussion in Revelation 13 of the two beasts pictures several external strategies of Satan, and as one will see later, the attacks on the specific churches in chapters two and three include both internal and external attacks. The first beast slanders the church (13:6), persecutes the church (3:7), and rules over the world in such a way that further alienates the church from the secular world (13:7-8). The second beast utilizes deception (13:14) as well as what Mounce calls “harassment” through economic pressure (13:16-17).

So far, the present reality of Satan and his kingdom according to Revelation has been delineated. However, his ultimate destiny is a vital component to the message of John’s apocalypse. First, in chapter eighteen, Babylon falls. This ancient city represents Satan’s rule and reign in the world. The citizens of Babylon are the people of Satan. Their destiny is destruction unlike the destiny of the saints. In chapters nineteen and twenty, the two beasts are defeated (19:19-20), Satan is bound, and then he is thrown into the “lake of fire and sulfur.” Satan and his kingdom are utterly defeated. Although the battle may be fierce now, Satan’s ultimate destiny is one of torment and doom, and in that truth as well as in the church’s ultimate destiny, one finds hope for both the future and the present.

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The church’s ultimate destiny and present reality. In the last section, one saw Satan and his kingdom as a powerful, deceiving, and destructive force attacking through various means God’s church for the sake of vengeance. Yet, the ultimate destiny for Satan and his kingdom is utter defeat; on the other hand, God and the church will experience total victory. The final chapters of Revelation outline the victory of God in the cosmic spiritual conflict. These chapters depict Christ as the conquering warrior and the kingdom of God as totally renewed. After considering these images of victory, we will examine the promised return and the sealing of the church which are two highly applicable truths for God’s kingdom people in the midst of the present reality. Finally, I will expound on the present reality of the church in the midst of the war as presented in Revelation 12-13.

The final chapters of the apocalypse begin with Christ coming to conquer. Revelation 19:11-20:6 is highly debated due to the inclusion of the millennium. A wide variety of eschatological views hinge on the interpretation of this passage. However, whichever millennial view one chooses, the central message of the passage is lucid: Christ is the conquering warrior that defeats the enemy and establishes His kingdom. This victory is the ultimate destiny to which many Old Testament prophecies point such as Psalm 2 and Isaiah 11:4. Mounce draws attention to several warrior images used in this passage. The rider on the white horse, Jesus, wears a garment that is dipped in blood. Mounce writes that “the figure draws heavily upon the poem of vengeance in Isaiah 63:1-6.” Christ commands an army in verse 14, strikes the enemy with a sword protruding from his mouth, and exerts God’s just wrath upon the kingdom of this world in verse 15. He conquers the two beasts and establishes His kingdom. One day, Christ will come to end the war. He will rule and reign. This end is the assured victory the church will enjoy. In Revelation 20:7-22:5, the blessings of the renewed kingdom are described. The righteous will be vindicated and the wicked will be punished (20:11-15). The church

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32Mounce, Book of Revelation, 345.
will dwell with God (21:3), and everything will be made new. The picture that John paints of the final destiny of God’s kingdom is absolutely amazing. Yet, this victory is still in the future.

Thus, as John ends his book, he finishes with promises that assure the church of God’s coming victory. Jesus repeats “I am coming soon” three times in the final chapter of Revelation to encourage his people to persevere through Satan’s attacks. John also includes assurances like these throughout his book. He describes the sealing of the people of God in chapter seven. While some authors argue differently, Jim Hamilton asserts that the 144,000 represent the entirety of the church. Mounce agrees based upon three points: Scripture refers to the church as the new Israel, the nature of the number is symbolic, and the list of tribes is peculiar. The important and undisputed point is that “God seals his people and guarantees their salvation.” This truth and the promise of Jesus’ coming are incredibly significant for the church as she reads the book of Revelation. For while the church already has a secure victory in Christ, she is currently in the midst of a very real battle.

While the present reality of Satan’s attacks have already been covered, the church’s perspective will now be addressed. Once again, a return to Revelation 12 is required for a final examination of the images of the woman and her offspring. The attacks of Satan that were discussed previously were toward these two figures. Osbourne contends that while there are similarities between ancient myths and this story, John is using these images for his unique purposes. Mounce rightly reasons that the woman represents the entirety of the people of God and the offspring, the church. There are two

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34Mounce, Book of Revelation, 168-69.
35Hamilton, Revelation, 192.
36Osbourne, Revelation, 454.
37Mounce, Book of Revelation, 236-47.
important points to understand about these images. First, the woman experiences the protection of the Lord. Her flight to the wilderness for protection is an image of God’s preservation of His people against the attacks of Satan and his kingdom. The entirety of God’s people will be preserved by God. However, this assurance does not mean that the woman or her offspring are immune to persecution or suffering. Based upon Revelation 12, G. K. Beale argues for preservation in the midst of persecution from Satan, and he cites several passages “(2 Sam. 22:5; Pss. 18:4, 16; 46:3; 66:12; 69:1–2, 14–15; 124:4–5; 144:7–8, 11; Isa. 43:2)” that point to the fact that God’s people are often persecuted by those from whom he eventually delivers. In the end, the church has the promise of preservation; yet, she is not promised protection from wounds caused by spiritual warfare.

Much attention has been given to Revelation 12-13 due to its centrality. Osbourne asserts, "It is common to label 12:1–13:8 the heart of the book, for it establishes the core theme, the war between God/his people and the dragon/his people and between the Lamb and his counterpart, the beast." Beale argues for the same conclusion and explains that the book of Revelation is split between chapters 11 and 12, and both 1-11 and 12-22 describe the same events. This observation builds a case that 12-13 are parallels of the present reality of spiritual warfare that is seen in 2-3. Many similar themes are evident between the letters and these chapters: the church as a conquering people, promised hope, perseverance, and Satan’s attacks on the church. In fact, Revelation 13:10 ends with a similar call to hear and persevere as each of the seven letters to the churches ends. These chapters provide a general picture of the cosmic warfare, and chapters two and three are specific pictures of spiritual warfare realities in


39Osbourne, Revelation, 454.

40Beale, Book of Revelation, 623.
local churches. The cosmic scope of spiritual warfare has been established, and this reality sets the stage for understanding how and why Christ addresses many of the churches with a view toward revitalization. The cosmic reality of spiritual warfare explains the ongoing necessity of revitalization.

The Pursuit of Revitalization in the Letters

Now, the particular manifestations of this spiritual conflict in Revelation will be considered. The cosmic conflict just discussed is the present reality in which the churches in Revelation 2-3 were living and churches today now exist, and this local reality is what leads to the need for church revitalization. Thus, the connections between the cosmic scope of spiritual warfare and the need for church revitalization will begin to be drawn. Revelation 2-3 presents letters to seven churches of which five are in need of revitalization due to the spiritual conflict in which they live. Jamieson agrees, “'In the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus himself works to reform those local congregations. He speaks to those churches in order to set right what is broken, to heal what is sick, to rebuke what is false, and to give new life to what is dying.’” Within this section, five themes that span the letters to the churches will be developed and connected to both spiritual warfare and church revitalization. These themes will exhibit not only the ongoing necessity of revitalization but also the hope, path, and means for revitalization. Prior to addressing these themes, however, two introductory points need to be made.

First, why does John include these particular churches, and is there a reason for choosing seven churches? Various commentators argue for geographical reasons; however, David Aune asserts that the reason for choosing the particular congregations is a mystery. While some compelling arguments can be made for various hypotheses, firm

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conclusions are difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, the number of churches chosen does seem to be significant. Stephen Homcy argues that “these seven churches are intended to represent the universal church throughout the age.” He bases his argument upon three premises. First, seven is consistently used as a symbol of completion. Second, the message to each church is ended with an exhortation for all churches to hear it. Lastly, he argues that the messages in these chapters have been needed throughout church history. Thus, these passages are abundantly important for churches today. Yet, the universality of the message does not negate the specific needs of the churches in their contexts at that point in time. The message is both particular and universal.

Now that the import of these passages has been established for churches today, we may turn our attention to the typical pattern utilized in the letters. Beale represents the consensus opinion concerning the outline of the letters. He divides the letters into seven parts that are typical of each letter in the following order: “Command to write. . . , Christ’s self-description. . . , commendation of the church’s good works. . . , accusation because of some sin, exhortation to repent. . . , exhortation to discern the truth. . . , and promise to the conquerers.” Each letter varies slightly, but this pattern is the normal structure of the letters. For the purpose of this study, the breakdown will consist of five categories. The initial exhortation for John to write will not be addressed, and the commendations and promises will be combined. The organization will differ slightly in order to help bring to light the applications for spiritual warfare and revitalization, but typically each segment will parallel Beale’s divisions. The following pages will focus on the self-revelation of Christ, His encouragement and promises, His rebukes and warnings, His exposure of the churches’ failures in battle, and His path to victory or revitalization.

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44Ibid.

45Beale, Book of Revelation, 225.
Prior to addressing the churches in decline, Smyrna and Philadelphia will be considered shortly. First, unlike the other five churches, these two are healthy churches experiencing persecution. Certainly, this persecution is an effect of the spiritual warfare that churches endure during the present age. However, this suffering has not led to decline in their situations as Christ does not rebuke these churches. Instead, He encourages them. His exhortation to them is to continue in faithfulness. While the power and motivation for their continued faithfulness is the same as those found in the other churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia are not experiencing decline. Thus, the letters to these churches are proactive attempts to prevent decline and cultivate growth rather than stymie and reverse decline. The nature of the ministry at these churches, proactively seeking continued faithfulness in the midst of spiritual warfare, is common to every church, but the work is not unique to church revitalization. As a result, Smyrna and Philadelphia will not be closely considered in the following pages as the primary purpose of this research is to consider the labor of revitalizing churches in decline due to spiritual warfare.

**Christ’s self-revelation.** Now, we turn our attention to the five churches in need of revitalization. After the opening phrase and the introduction of the particular local church in view, Jesus identifies himself to the congregation. Each time He does this, He refers to the vision of the Son of Man that John has in chapter one. In his commentary on Revelation, G. R. Beasley-Murray connects these visions to specific aspects of the message for each church.46 Each of the five churches in view are pointed to a specific image of Christ for distinct purposes. For example, concerning the church at Ephesus, Beasley-Murray asserts the following: “This [vision of Christ] serves as a reminder that the churches, whose life derives from their fellowship in Jesus, are upheld by him and subject to his power, and their conduct falls beneath his searching scrutiny as he moves among them on earth. Both elements of the description are in place in a message which

stresses the disciplinary judgment of Christ upon his people.” These specific self-descriptions are apparently intentional and vital aspects of Christ’s message to each church. As each letter begins with a powerful image of Christ, His authority is established, His power is revealed, and the urgency of His message is clearly demonstrated. As the churches are confronted with their weaknesses and failures, the vision of Christ is in the background and pointing them toward the source of power and motivation for recovering faithfulness in their congregations. The five churches needed to see Christ in these specific ways in order to be renewed. Both power and motivation for revitalization are derived from these self-revelations of the nature of Christ.

Christ’s encouragement and promises. Next, two major, positive themes frame the coming rebuke of Christ: encouragement and promise. First, Christ encourages each congregation with current evidences of grace in their churches. The Ephesians exhibit good works and “cannot bear with those who are evil.” The church at Pergamum “did not deny my faith.” Even Sardis and Laodicea, who seem to have no evidence of grace in their congregations, are encouraged by Christ. He points to a few who are “worthy” in Sardis, and then as evidenced by His rebuke, He asserts His love for the Laodiceans. This encouragement is indispensable in the renewal of the churches.

Second, Christ points the churches to their future eschatological hope. At the end of each message to the churches, Christ proclaims an exclusive promise for those who conquer. Homcy makes a couple of important observations about the idea of conquering both in Revelation as a whole and specifically here in chapters two through three. The idea of the church as conquerers is exhibited in the message of Revelation that Christ is the ultimate victor and the church is called to be victorious in Him. Christ is exhorting His people to be conquerers in Him. Also, Homcy delineates what conquering

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means and why Christ includes the idea in chapters two through three. The victory is an “ongoing victory over the forces that oppose God and his church,” and Christ is seeking to encourage His people toward this end. A consistent theme throughout Revelation, and especially in the letters, is the idea of patient endurance or holding fast. These go hand in hand with the idea of conquering. One must hold fast against the attacks of the enemy in order to have ongoing victory. The exhortation to “hold fast” as seen in the letter to Thyatira establishes an expectation that churches will persevere until the end; thus, when a church is in decline, there is an expectation for revitalization. Ultimately, the call to conquer entails both continued faithfulness in good times and revitalization in the midst of decline.

Now, considering the promises, Richard E. Oster Jr. contends that the promises given to those who conquer are images intended to provide assurance of eschatological hope. For example, the tree of life promised in the letter to Ephesus is an image that both refers to the perfection of original creation in Genesis as well as the future perfection in Revelation 22:2. Oster argues that the promise of a white stone for the church of Pergamum is the opposite of an ancient symbol of rejection: “being ‘blackstoned.’” Christ was promising ultimate acceptance and victory for those who faithfully conquered in this life. Each promise contains captivating images of the future eschatological hope. In light of the rebukes that Christ pronounces in each letter, these promises are vital for providing motivation for positive responses.

Christ’s rebukes and warnings. Next, Christ rebukes these five churches and proclaims a warning of the consequences involved in not responding positively. Each rebuke is based upon a sharp or extended decline in faithfulness. Christ follows His

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51 Ibid., 143.
encouraging words to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira with the following phrase: “But I have this against you.” This phrase clearly sets apart the reason for rebuke. Since the encouragement for Sardis and Laodicea does not come until later, Christ immediately attacks the problem without any introductory phrase. Christ’s rebuke is no mere angry rant toward the churches. Instead, these rebukes are calls for revitalization. Christ does not long to see His bride wither away and die; thus, as He points out in His words to Laodicea, He disciplines those He loves and calls them to life again. Nevertheless, this call for revitalization is followed by a warning for those who refuse to respond rightly. For instance, Christ promises to remove the lampstand of the church at Ephesus if she does not pursue repentance and faithfulness. Beale highlights the lampstand imagery of the Old Testament in order to provide insight into Jesus’ reference. Zechariah 4 presents Israel as a lampstand. Yet, in Isaiah 42:6-7 and 49:6, Israel loses the privilege of being the lampstand because of her lack of faithfulness. This same judgment waits for not only the church as Ephesus but also for any church that refuses to repent at the rebuke of Christ. The choice is clear: pursue ongoing victory in this spiritual war by seeking revitalization in areas of decline or experience the judgment of Christ and the death of your church.

**Christ’s exposure of the churches’ failures in battle.** The fourth major theme that can be traced through these five letters is the decline of the churches as a result of Satan’s attacks. As Christ rebukes the churches, He exposes their specific failures to be conquerers. As previously traced throughout the book of Revelation, the church is in the midst of a cosmic war with the kingdom of Satan. The Evil One seeks to destroy the people of God in whatever way possible. Thus, while the churches are responsible for their failures, the decline they are experiencing is a result of Satan’s attacks. Each church’s unique decline in faithfulness is influenced in powerful ways by Satan’s specific

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temptations. Considering each church and the area of decline into which Satan has sought to lead them will provide insight into the typical ways that churches experience a decline in faithfulness.

First, Ephesus continues to do all of the right things; yet, they have lost the central aspect of those works: love. Satan has sought to undermine the motives of the church at Ephesus. With loveless motives, every good work and teaching is practically worthless. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 13. Also, Stetzer and Rankin make a good point: “Churches can be right and committed but ineffective because their motivation is wrong. Orthodoxy is never an end into itself.” Satan attacks the motives of churches because they will begin to decline as long as their motives are wrong.

Second, the church of Pergamum has allowed false teaching to seep into its congregation. As previously discussed, Satan is a deceiver. He longs not only to deceive the world but also the church through false teaching. Pergamum was failing to conquer because they had not diligently fought against the attack of Satan. Next, Thyatira is rebuked for both her toleration of and participation in sin. Sometimes Satan attacks by seeking to create a tolerant spirit toward sin. Instead of disciplining those in sin, the church at Thyatira had grown tolerant, and as a result, many began to take part in the sin as well. In order to conquer, this church must eradicate her toleration of sin.

Fourth, Beale argues that the church at Sardis has developed an incomplete witness. Based upon the introductory image, which alludes to the idea of witness, and the idea that the church has a good reputation but incomplete works, the church at Sardis appears to have failed to complete her witness and conquer. In whatever form her compromise took, she clearly was lacking in her evangelistic witness to the world. Satan wants nothing more than for the church to fail in this area. Finally, Laodicea is described as “lukewarm.” The text does not seem to support the idea that faithful believers are hot

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53Rankin, *Spiritual Warfare & Missions*, 255.

and unbelievers are cold as in this case, the text would apparently be implying that to be
an unbeliever is better than being lukewarm. Instead, M.J.S. Rudwick points first to the
contemporary situation in which the Laodiceans, despite being rich, could not obtain hot
or cold water of which both have good uses. As a result, the water supply for Laodicea
was used as a symbol to represent their “uselessness” and “ineffective[ness]” for the
Lord.\textsuperscript{55} Yet, ineffectiveness seems to be a symptom rather than the root of the problem.
Instead, arrogance and self-reliance are at the core their decline. Apparently, they believe
they are prosperous and “need nothing;” however, Jesus asserts that they are actually
“wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” He calls them to come humbly and rely upon
him for their riches. Satan has sought to develop an attitude of pride and self-reliance in
the church at Laodicea. In order to conquer, the Laodiceans must flee this temptation.

All declining churches succumbed to various temptations, and they
experienced decline because they failed to conquer Satan alongside Christ. Thus, they
each need revitalization, and the same is true for churches today. Decline is rooted in
succeeding to Satan in spiritual warfare. The ongoing need for revitalization in local
churches is found in the reality that some churches will capitulate to Satan’s varied
temptations.

\textbf{Christ’s path to victory.} Despite having rebuked and exposed such deplorable
situations, Christ does not leave the churches without direction. He guides them away
from decline and toward victory once again. In other words, he provides a path to
revitalization. Christ’s path involves three primary steps: listen, repent, and hold fast.
First, the call to listen to Christ’s exhortation is loud and clear. Every letter to the
churches includes the phrase, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the
churches.” One cannot work toward conquering and revitalizing without hearing the
Word of God. Listening as the Spirit of God speaks through His Word is vital. Next, a

\textsuperscript{55}M. J. S. Rudwick, ”The Lukewarmness of Laodicea (Rev. iii.16),” \textit{Tyndale House Bulletin}
no. 3 (June 1957): 2.
step that is not always primary should be considered. In both the letters to Ephesus and Sardis, Christ calls the churches to remember. For some churches in decline, looking back on their rich history of faithfulness to see how far they have fallen is incredibly helpful. Often, Satan can encourage doubts of salvation during times of conviction; thus, remembering can encourage a church as it sees God’s previous work among them.

The second primary step toward conquering is to repent of the sins that led to decline. All five churches that have experienced decline are called to repent. Recognizing sin is not enough. Churches must turn from that sin and toward Christ. Once a church has genuinely repented, she has officially taken steps in faithfulness again. Now, she must continue in that faithfulness by holding fast. As discussed earlier, an essential part of conquering is persevering in faithfulness. In order for revitalization to have a lasting effect, churches must not only listen and repent but also hold fast.

**The need and key concepts for revitalization.** Now, a final synthesis of ideas presented throughout Revelation concerning spiritual warfare and the specific victory of church revitalization must be drawn. In light of the previous arguments, the need and key concepts for church revitalization can be extrapolated. First, the need for revitalization will be firmly established from evidence in Revelation. Then, the four key concepts will be presented.

As has been reiterated, the reality of spiritual warfare is clear in the book of Revelation on both a cosmic and local scale. Satan and his kingdom have set themselves in direct opposition to God and His kingdom. This spiritual war has tremendous casualties. However, the people of God have been sealed for redemption. They cannot lose their salvation, their victory. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the war is not undermined by this truth. Instead, those who are promised victory are simply motivated by it. They are called to conquer. For, those who conquer show themselves to be part of the church, the kingdom people of God, who have been sealed for redemption.
Due to the fact that victory has been accomplished yet not fully experienced during this age, the church lives in a time in which losses in some battles are a reality. The already/not yet eschatological reality has huge ramifications for spiritual warfare and church revitalization. Allison describes this reality of the church as its eschatological nature, and he argues that the “‘not yet’ aspect cautions the church not to overreach with its expectations; indeed, it warns the church to expect the continual presence of idolatry, disobedience, faithlessness, division, sin, worldliness, lukewarmness, stagnation, immorality, wrong decisions, and the like.” The church must be aware of the not yet reality of spiritual warfare. Casualties and decline are part of the present existence. Thus, the need for church revitalization is inherent in the cosmic and local realities of spiritual warfare.

In order for churches to be revitalized after succumbing to the attacks of the enemy in this present age, four key concepts must be utilized. Churches in need of revitalization must be diagnosed, powered, motivated, and directed by the Word. When referring to the Word, both the incarnate and written Word are included. Each one of these concepts find its roots in the book of Revelation. Additionally, in light of the pneumodynamic nature of the church, dying churches must be rely upon the power of the Spirit. If any of these concepts is overlooked, then movement toward revitalization will be greatly hindered.

The process of revitalization must begin with diagnosis. The letters to the churches in Revelation are the direct words of the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. He personally diagnosed each of the churches’ failures. He rebuked them and called them to revitalization. While direct revelation from the incarnate Word no longer occurs for churches today, dying churches have access to the totally sufficient written Word. Second Timothy 3:16 describes Scripture as working with the same diagnostic power that Christ

had in Revelation. God now speaks by His Spirit through the written Word to expose areas of weakness and decline in particular churches. If the problem areas are never revealed and diagnosed, then dying churches will never realize their need, and as a result, they will lose the battle and have their “lampstand” removed.

Next, the power for revitalization must be far greater than any power that has set itself against the church. Thus, victory will only be won when a church is powered by the Word and the Spirit. Both Revelation 12:11 and chapters 2-3 point to this truth. First, Revelation 12:11 is cited by Beasley-Murray as “the most significant statement in the chapter.”\(^{57}\) George Ladd writes that its “single intent . . . is to assure those who meet satanic evil on earth that it is really a defeated power, however contrary it might seem to human experience.”\(^{58}\) And Beale asserts that it contains “the basis of the victory that suffering Christians on earth win over the serpent throughout history.”\(^{59}\) This verse exalts the blood of Christ, or the Word, as the power by which the church conquers Satan and his kingdom. The power for conquering is also found in “the word of their testimony.” This refers to the church’s persevering in her reliance upon the blood of the lamb. To turn from faith and reliance upon Christ’s blood is sure to destroy the power to conquer.

This truth can also be seen in the self-revelation of Christ in chapters 2-3. As previously argued, the imagery of Christ in the beginning of the letters magnifies His authority and power. Jesus establishes Himself as the sovereign judge and powerful savior. These images of Christ establish Him as the source of power. Thus, knowing Him by faith provides access to that power. In order to have power for victory and revitalization, churches must not only believe in Christ’s power but also experience His power through faith in Him as Lord and Savior.

Additionally, though not emphasized in Revelation, the pneumadynamic nature

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of the church is clearly vital for the power to be victorious in spiritual warfare. Each of
the Word-centric concepts for revitalization gleaned from Revelation are vitally
connected to the empowering presence and work of the Spirit. Explaining the
pneumadynamic nature, Allison highlights several aspects of the Spirit’s work that are
essential for church health and particularly relevant to the key revitalization concepts
gleaned from Revelation:

This powerful working of the Spirit continues throughout the lives of Christians as
he progressively transforms them into greater and greater conformity to the image of
Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18); indeed, the Holy Spirit is singled out as being particularly
responsible for sanctification (1 Pet. 1:2). He provides everything that is needed to
overcome the power of sin, and by the fruit he produces Christians exhibit more and
more the characteristics of Jesus Christ in their lives (Gal. 5:16–23). For this reason
Christians are to be guided by the Spirit (Rom. 8:4–8) or filled with the Spirit (Eph.
5:18), that is, controlled by and submissive to his leading. The Spirit also aids them
in prayer (Rom. 8:26–27) and illumines their understanding of the Word of God (1
Cor. 2: 10–16).  

The Spirit empowers for spiritual warfare by convicting of sin through the diagnosis of
the Word, illuminating the Word, and guiding the church through the Word-centric
revitalization process. Ultimately, the work of Christ on the cross, His resurrection, and
the indwelling presence of the Spirit are the ultimate sources of power in this spiritual
battle and work of revitalization.

The third key concept is that dying churches must be motivated by the Word.
Jesus motivated the churches in Revelation through encouragement according to
evidences of grace and promises of future hope. Both of these factors need to be present
in order for a church to be properly and fully motivated to pursue revitalization and
ongoing victory. Remembering the grace of God that was evident in the past can help, but
typically, even in terrible situations, if true salvation is present, some grace of God can be
found and celebrated. The encouragement of seeing even the small works of God’s grace
can have a huge impact on the motivation of dying churches, and instances of grace will
be found as one is examining the Word and evaluating oneself against it. Along with this

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60 Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 2866-72.
encouragement, churches need to meditate upon the promised eschatological hope. Jesus points the churches to this throughout chapters 2 and 3, and the entire book of Revelation ends with the great culminating hope of finally dwelling with God. These two factors are vital for motivating the people of God toward victory and revitalization. Dying churches must turn to the Word for motivation rather than other sources.

Finally, revitalization must be directed by the Word. The path to revitalization that was discussed in the previous section demonstrated this clearly. Christ provided a clear Word-centered path to victory over the evil one. First, one must listen carefully to the Word, and then, one must properly respond to the Word through repentance. Lastly, one must hold fast by continuing in the Spirit and being renewed by the Word. As a church hears the Word, specific direction will be provided. Relying upon new methods or models of “doing” church will not suffice. Instead, the Word will not only give direction out of decline but also provide the needed guidance for remaining faithful in the midst of attack.

**Conclusion**

Spiritual warfare and the church’s position in redemptive history provide a hopeful realism for ministers and churches. Lovelace explains, “All of the traditional eschatological positions can be harmonized with the model of the church’s missionary movement presented here, which considers it as an army of liberation progressively freeing and clearing territory from demonic control in a pulsating series of advances and temporary fallbacks.”

Though grieved by the situation, we should not be surprised, and certainly not resigned to the fact that the need for revitalization is ongoing, and as a result, many churches are dying and bear little resemblance to Christ. Instead, we should

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61Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 427. Also, see Lewis A. Drummond, *The Awakening That Must Come* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 95-98. Drummond writes, “The Law of Progress. . . God is progressively active in our world. That is axiomatic. This progressive work of God is not a steady, stabilized move upward however. It ebbs and flows; seemingly a protracted period of little movement, then suddenly a fresh surge of the Spirit lifts the church to the heights. . . . The Law of Periodicity, . . . There is an ebb and flow to the spiritual health of the church, and God will move at variable intervals to revive his church in connection to the needs and activities of his church.”
pursue the revitalization of churches, for they are specially equipped as God’s new covenant people with the hope, path, and means for revitalization.

In the final chapter, the arguments presented so far will be summarized. Then, based upon the biblical and theological reasons for revitalization ministry, two primary issues will be addressed. First, conclusions will be drawn concerning legitimate and illegitimate reasons to allow a church to die. Finally, biblical means and models for revitalization—the how—will be derived from the reasons for revitalization—the why.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PURSUING REVITALIZATION

The death toll continues to rise. Numerous churches close their doors each week in North America. While renewed efforts to plant churches are playing a significant role in replacing lost witness in communities with closed churches and reaching the lost in a wide variety of contexts, Paul Hiebert rightly observes, “Any long-range vision for missions must include not only the planting of new churches but also the renewal of old ones. The former without the latter eventually leads only to lands full of dead and dying churches. The birth of new congregations is no guarantee that they will remain spiritually alive.”¹ Church planting is a vital aspect of missions, but it cannot be the only solution to the epidemic of dying churches and the accomplishment of missions. Church revitalization is an absolutely essential ministry for many reasons based upon the God-given identities of churches. Much more than merely essential, the ministry of church revitalization is an opportunity to glorify God in a unique and powerful way, to magnify the beauty of the Gospel, to exhibit the power of the Spirit, to cultivate unified diversity, and to develop whole disciples. Those who commit their lives to this ministry can be part of making old things new thus exhibiting the restorative power of the Gospel. The reasons for pursuing revitalization are manifold. As I conclude this vision for revitalization, I will summarize the foundational identities and the corresponding reasons for the revitalization of churches, and from the foundational reasons for church revitalization, I will develop the proper goals and evaluative measures, the legitimate reasons to stop pursuing revitalization, and the means and models for revitalization.

A Summary of a Biblical Vision for Revitalization

In order to possess a biblical vision for the revitalization of churches that includes both motivation and methodology, one must grasp the identities that God has provided the universal church and as a result individual local churches. Stephen J. Wellum asserts,

"Within the church, we are preoccupied with pragmatism and downplay theology. Thus, to ask "What is the church?" is viewed as unnecessary and counterproductive to carrying out the church's mission. So we often ask instead: "How should we do church?" or "What works best in order for the church to carry out her mission in the world?" Obviously these questions are important. Yet we must first wrestle with what the church is before we can know what she should be doing in the world."²

Only the teleological ontology of the local church can provide the proper sustainable motivation. Certainly, poor reasons to pursue the revitalization of churches exist. Pastors may be tempted to pursue revitalization for the sake of maintaining their income or assuaging their pride, and others may long to prevent their church from shutting her doors because of sentimentality or comfort. Yet, powerful, biblical reasons for the pursuit of revitalization are evident in the nature of churches, and despite the difficulties associated with revitalization, provide the needed impetus not only to pursue revitalization but also to develop other revitalizers. In the following pages, I will provide a short summary of the identities of churches and the biblical reasons for revitalization presented thus far. Then, I will briefly highlight the proper goals of and evaluative measures for revitalization.

Identities and Reasons

The church possesses three primary identities based upon her relationships with God, among her members, and with the world. These three identities along with the ongoing need for revitalization due to spiritual warfare yield the reasons to pursue the revitalization of churches and even an ongoing movement of revitalization. First, the

church and *ipso facto* local churches are created as worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. As part of God’s chosen people throughout history, churches bear a doxological orientation that is intended to be exhibited especially through gathering for corporate worship and scattering to live holy lives in the world. As a display people, churches inherently communicate a message about who God is, and when a local body is dying, God is not being glorified as He should. Yet, when a church is revitalized, God is glorified as the one who can heal the sick and restore life to the dying. Thus, revitalization must be pursued first and foremost for the glory of God.

But, revitalization and consistent faithfulness is only possible through being centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. Churches must align themselves with Jesus as the cornerstone, follow His lead as the bridegroom and chief shepherd, and trust in His Gospel. Jesus seeks the one sheep who left the ninety-nine, and as undershepherds, pastors have been called to do the same not only with wandering individuals but also with dying churches. If pastors are going to imitate Christ, a significant portion will commit themselves to revitalizing dying churches. Certainly, many legitimate ministries exist for those called to vocational ministry, but for many pastors, imitating Christ will involve the pursuit of dying churches through revitalization. Also, the Spirit has empowered churches with what they need to be sustained, renewed, and equipped for life and ministry. The indwelling presence of the Spirit provides hope for dying churches, and as a result, hope-filled motivation to pursue revitalization. Based upon how God has created His church, Richard Lovelace warns,

> Ministers who separate from impure churches alienate themselves, not only from the leadership structure they denounce, but also from the ongoing stream of lay people for which God intended them as gifts. These ministers should not be surprised to see repeated outpourings of the Spirit and fruitful reproduction of new leadership in the bodies they have left, because God is faithful to his covenant people in succeeding generations even if the present generation has gone whoring with false prophets.³

Rather than being apathetic and resigned to the plight of dying churches, a movement of

pastors and lay people alike must listen to the nature of God’s New Testament people and respond with zeal for the revitalization of churches.

Second, churches are created by God as family with one another. Church members have been made God’s children and siblings with one another. This familial relationship is characterized by unity amidst diversity, sacrificial love, and interdependence. The oneness of God’s people is intended to glorify God and provide a picture of the unity within the Trinity. The covenantal relationship God’s people possess with Him is intended to be reflected in the covenant formed among members of a local church. Flowing from the church’s covenantal nature, local church membership provides significant motivation to pursue revitalization. The covenant among church members is intended to reflect God’s love that continues despite our sins and seasons of unfaithfulness. The commitment church members have with one another motivates efforts for revitalization for the sake of restoring the unfaithful, reinvigorating the discouraged, and mobilizing the apathetic. Also, churches have been created as confessional, and as a result, their unity is enhanced by the ordinances and a confession of faith. Provided with these means, churches are reminded of their unity and called to pursue their unity in the Gospel. Inherent in these confessional structures is a call to pursue revitalization. Additionally, the identity of family with one another leads church members to value all members. A proper view of the body of Christ pursues revitalization because every member has a gift that God intends to use to strengthen His people, and each member is highly valued by God. Thus, rather than abandoning stubborn or unhealthy members, pastors and healthy lay people must commit to laboring for the revitalization of churches for the sake of every member.

Third, churches are missionaries to the world. God’s people have been sent on mission to make whole disciples of all peoples. The sent nature of churches entails a witness. Churches are to bear witness to the Gospel throughout the world. The witness occurs in both word and deed. Dying churches are often struggling in both of these areas.
Many have lost sight of the true Gospel; thus, the core message of our faith is not preached clearly or at all. Other churches may preach the Gospel with their lips but fail to corroborate it with their lives. Dying churches undermine the goal of witness which is to draw others into the worship of God because they repel people by a distorted Gospel witness. When a church is revitalized, a negative witness to the Gospel is removed and replaced with a positive witness. Another reason to pursue revitalization in light of the missionary nature of churches is the call of the Great Commission itself. Conversion to Christ is not the end goal. Both reaching the lost and teaching the saints are essential for faithfulness to mission. Thus, merely pursuing the most effective evangelistic efforts, i.e. church planting, is not holistically faithful to God’s mission for us. The development of healthy churches and the revitalization of dying churches are essential to bringing everyone to maturity in Jesus (Col 1:28).

Finally, churches also possess a spatio-temporal/eschatological nature which provides multiple important implications. The spatio-temporal nature necessitates that churches will have a physical presence and often will possess physical resources. Revitalization is one means for stewarding the resources God has provided for His people. Also, the already/not yet nature of churches expresses the reality that churches will ebb and flow in faithfulness in all areas including mission, but the coming eschatological victory provides confidence to persevere and pursue renewed faithfulness through revitalization. The ebb and flow of a church’s health is due to the spiritual war in which all churches participate during the current eschatological age. Though Satan and his kingdom are destined for ruin and God and His church for victory, the battle in the current stage of redemptive history is very real and intense. Revitalization will always be needed in this age due to the reality of spiritual warfare; yet, it should be pursued with zeal because it is a significant way we are called to fight against Satan and his kingdom.

A consistent element through each of the identities is the regular corporate gathering. The weekly gathering of a church is not only an inherent aspect of who God
has created His people to be but also a significant reason to pursue church revitalization. First, the corporate gathering is to be a manifestation of the life of the people of God in miniature. First and foremost, the gathering is for the glory of God, and unfortunately, many dying churches gather in such a way that they fail to promote God’s glory above all. Often, these gatherings are prioritized around people’s preferences rather than magnifying God’s great name in worship and witness. Thus, revitalization must be pursued so that the church gathered might glorify God’s name. Additionally, the corporate gathering is a means for the sake of revitalization. When centered upon the Word, the corporate gathering has a revitalizing effect upon the congregation by promoting remembrance and realignment with the Gospel. Since God has given us this means for ongoing revitalization, we must pursue revitalization for the sake of churches’ growth and health as worshipers, family, and missionaries.

**Proper Goals of Revitalization**

In addition to motivating the pursuit of revitalization, the identities outlined above provide insight into the proper goals for the pursuit of not only revitalization but also church ministry in general. A holistic understanding of the church and her purposes transforms the goals of pastors and leaders. The goal isn’t just building bigger and more excellent churches but rather glorifying God (worshipers), loving one another (family), and expanding God’s kingdom people through making whole disciples (missionaries). Yet, the vision for church revitalization must not end with one’s own church being revitalized. The overall oneness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church should cultivate a vision that goes beyond a single work to a movement. As a church is becoming healthy, a vision for multiplication in one’s community and beyond should continue expanding. Planting and revitalizing other churches is a natural and proper goal for the revitalization of a church, and the pursuit and accomplishment of this goal will contribute to a movement rather than a singular work. Timothy Keller argues that church
planting will actually contribute to the revitalization of the churches in a community. He asserts,

The way to renew the existing churches of a city is by planting new ones. . . . New churches bring new ideas to the whole body. . . . New churches raise up new, creative Christian leaders of the city. . . . New churches challenge other churches to self-examination. . . . New churches can be an evangelistic feeder system for a whole community. . . . To summarize: Vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to renew the existing churches of a city, as well as the best single way to grow the whole body of Christ in a city.4

When a revitalized church plants a church, she will contribute to holistic transformation in a community, but revitalized churches must also consider how to directly contribute to the revitalization of other churches.

Having vision and experience for addressing the need of church revitalization, revitalized churches are in a particularly helpful position to promote the revitalization of other churches. This pursuit is the natural outflow of grasping the mission of making whole disciples, the value of the entire body of Christ, and the ultimate purpose of glorifying God. Additionally, whole communities will be transformed as churches are planted and revitalized and a movement forms as a result. Keller explains that a transformative movement will develop when a community reaches a “tipping point.”5 He contends, “Isolated events or individual entities crystallize into a growing, self-sustaining movement when they reach a tipping point, a moment when the movement dynamics for change become unstoppable. A tipping point is a sociological term—‘the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point.’”6 A community will reach the tipping point more quickly if churches are pursuing the goal of multiplying churches through both planting and revitalizing. The goals of revitalizing churches include the local effects in particular churches as well as larger movements.

4Timothy Keller, Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 360-61.
5Ibid., 376.
6Ibid.
Proper Evaluative Measures

Revitalization seeks to bring significant change to the life of a church, and evaluation is a necessary element in any change program. Businesses and other secular institutions in need of change understand this reality and have developed great tools for self-evaluation. However, according to Aubrey Malphurs, many people argue against evaluation in the church because churches are “a spiritual not a secular undertaking.”7 People avoid evaluation in order to avoid secularizing the sacred, but ultimately, as Malphurs contends, informal evaluation takes place whether we like it or not.8 For instance, Schaller suggests, “Most ‘votes’ in the church in the self-evaluation process are cast not with the voice or a show of hands or by a questionnaire. The most meaningful ‘votes’ in the church are cast with the feet and the pocketbook.”9

In addition to the natural, informal evaluation that inevitably takes place, Malphurs argues that biblical precedent is strongly in support of evaluation based upon several texts. First, many times throughout the book of Acts, reports of numerical growth are given. Second, Paul’s list of qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 implies expected evaluation of leaders for these traits. Next, Paul encourages self-evaluation on an individual and corporate level in 1 Corinthians 11:28 for the specific context of the Lord’s Supper. Finally, the letters to the churches in Revelation serve as a clear example of Jesus’ practice of evaluation.10 Clearly, biblical evidence points to a significant degree of evaluation within the local church. Additionally, bearing the image of God, humanity has been given the ability to think critically, thus image bearers should be evaluators. Merton Strommen asserts, “Evaluation is a necessary function of a

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8 Ibid., 296.
10 Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 296.
thinking and concerned person.”\textsuperscript{11}

How then should evaluation be viewed in the context of the local church? Certainly, as opposed to Jesus’ evaluation in the book of Revelation, human designed and executed evaluation is going to contain flaws, but this reality does not negate the fact that evaluation can be a helpful instrument if used in conjunction with wisdom.\textsuperscript{12} Used in close connection to the standard of God’s Word, quality, formal evaluation is a significant means of God’s refining work in churches. Strommen argues, “He can use them to show his people the serious shortcomings in their understanding of God's special revelation and their obedience to it.”\textsuperscript{13} No matter what stage of life a church is presently experiencing, evaluation in light of God’s Word and guided by the Spirit is a biblically warranted and necessary practice.

While the necessity of evaluation is true for all of God’s churches, it is especially relevant and urgent for dying churches. When experiencing serious spiritual decline, renewal is found through seeking the Lord with a repentant heart (2 Chr 7:14).\textsuperscript{14} Repentance requires a recognition of “wicked ways” and a need to humble oneself. Thus, renewal must involve evaluating oneself in light of who the Lord is and who He calls the church to be. For as Richard Lovelace argues, ongoing renewal will only be possible when one begins with a recognition of God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, while sin is at least a partial cause of church decline, sin is typically not the sole explanation for the state of dying churches. Several men have listed possible growth hindrances to


\textsuperscript{13}Strommen, “Evaluation and Christian Growth,” 199.


\textsuperscript{15}Lovelace, \textit{Dynamics of Spiritual Life}, 81.
consider in evaluation processes. While some are spiritual/sin issues and others are cultural/physical/personality issues, all of these areas must be evaluated and addressed in order for a church to experience complete revitalization.

Having established the validity of evaluation, the measures for evaluation must be considered, and the current research possesses particular relevance for this issue in revitalization. The foundational framework for evaluation is grounded in the primary identities of churches. The four creedal marks of the church also contribute to the issue of evaluation. To evaluate without addressing these criteria is to evaluate unbiblically. Since a revitalized church will have a biblical orientation to God, among its members, and to the world, the entire life of a particular church should be evaluated according to her health as worshipers, family, and missionaries along with the corresponding creedal markers. The faithfulness and fruitfulness of every aspect of a church, the beliefs, the leadership, the structures, the methods, etc., should be assessed for its contributions to these identities.

Implications: When Revitalization Should No Longer Be Sought

Now, having summarized the arguments of this research, one of the two remaining secondary research questions will be addressed: when should revitalization of a particular church no longer be sought? Malphurs contends, “The stark reality is that some churches need to die. They have outlived any further usefulness.”


judges His people for the sake of His name as seen with Israel,\textsuperscript{18} and in Jesus’ letters to the churches in Revelation, the threat of judgment and destruction is evident. Nonetheless, is usefulness really the primary consideration? Is present futility a legitimate reason to abandon a church to die? Even when Jesus cites the ineffectiveness of the Laodiceans, their uselessness is a symptom of the core problem for which they are being disciplined; thus, a more holistic paradigm must be considered when evaluating whether to pursue revitalization or not. Other possible reasons for abandoning revitalization efforts can be proposed: an unwillingness to change, wasted resources or time, the pursuit of the unreached (search missiology), the greater effectiveness of church plants, and significant pain caused by established churches. Yet, are these reasons and others legitimate or illegitimate?

Ultimately, one does not find any reason other than becoming a false church that would lead toward the Lord willing a church to reach death before Christ’s return. The letters to the churches in Revelation express a desire for churches to return to Him that are in danger of becoming false churches. Jesus threatens destruction, but He only does this if the church continues in sinful ways which prove her to be false. Additionally, the already/not yet concept that characterizes the church leads to the realization that churches will ebb and flow in their faithfulness, purity, and unity until the end of the age. We should expect churches to plateau and decline, but this eschatological reality actually provides hope for dying churches. Decline is natural in a spiritual war, but God wills for churches to persevere to the end. Through an examination of what makes a church true or false, a basic framework will be provided for determining when revitalization should or should not be pursued, and legitimate and illegitimate reasons for abandoning

\textsuperscript{18}Edmund P. Clowney writes, “Eventually both kingdoms are destroyed and the people carried into exile. Yet, even in the midst of judgment, God continues to make his name known among the nations. The very severity of his wrath against Israel is a sanctifying of his holy name, but God will also sanctify his name among the nations by delivering Israel, as he had done in Egypt (Ezk. 20:9, 14, 22, 39, 44; 36:20).” Edmund P. Clowney, “The Biblical Theology of the Church,” The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1987), 40.
revitalization will be expressed in alignment with the basic framework for delineating true and false churches.

**Legitimate Reasons**

The church enjoys a unique relationship with Christ as His bride, and Wolfgang Muschulus comments on the implications of this relationship:

The church of Christ is in the same position as a wife. Even if a wife commits adultery a thousand times, it does not follow that she is no longer married. Adultery does not create a situation in which a married woman is no longer a wife, nor does it make her the wife of the adulterer rather than of her [lawful] husband. Nor does the husband lose the rights that he has with respect to his wife merely because she has been seduced into committing adultery. If she repents and he takes her back, he is not accepting a stranger but the wife who already belongs to him. Thus when David demanded that Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, should give him back his wife Michal, even though she was already married to another man and had been living with him for some time, he still said, “Give me back my wife Michal.” In the same way, once the church has been married to Christ, it does not matter if she plays the harlot with angels, men and all the demons of hell, because the rights that Christ has over her cannot be infringed by whoredom and adultery or create a situation in which she is no longer his church. When she repents and is taken back by her husband and Lord Christ, she is received not as a stranger but as his own.19

While this preservation is true of the universal bride of Christ and provides hope and impetus for revitalization of local churches who have been unfaithful, the crux of the matter becomes whether a particular gathering of people who self-identify as a church can still rightfully be called a church of Christ. When a church can no longer be considered a true church of Jesus Christ, revitalization should no longer be pursued though evangelistic efforts should. The vital distinction that must be made is between a true and false church. Allison makes this distinction between “true churches—assemblies that are defined by and live the gospel of Jesus Christ—and false churches—assemblies that either were not founded on the genuine gospel of Jesus Christ or have departed from it.”20

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While Allison utilizes a continuum to discuss true and false churches,21 an anthropological theory for defining groups is a particularly helpful tool. Paul G. Hiebert discusses set theory and provides an important paradigm in centered sets. In missiology, how we define our bounded sets of salvation and thus our goals in mission affects how we go about our mission. In pursuing church growth and health, how we define a growing or healthy church affects how we pursue it. Concerning church revitalization, how we define which “churches” are actual churches affects not only how we pursue revitalization but also whether or not we actually pursue it in the first place. Discussing the formation of categories to define ideas such as what it means to be a Christian or a church, Hiebert provides two variables that affect categorization:

Intrinsic sets are formed on the basis of the essential nature of the members themselves—on what they are in and of themselves. . . . Extrinsic, or relational, sets are formed, not on the basis of what things are, but on their relationship to other things or to a reference point. . . . The second variable in forming categories has to do with their boundaries: Well-formed sets have a sharp boundary. Things either belong to the set or they do not. The result is a clear boundary between things that are inside and things that are outside the category. Fuzzy sets have no sharp boundaries. Categories flow into one another. For example, day becomes night, and a mountain turns into a plain without a clear transition.”22

Four kinds of sets are possible: bounded sets, intrinsic fuzzy sets, centered sets, and extrinsic fuzzy sets.23

A centered set, which is defined by its relationship to a center and to clear boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, provides the best framework for defining churches for the sake of both distinguishing true versus false churches and evaluating the health and direction of a congregation. A centered set definition possesses clear boundaries of what separates true and false churches and acknowledges movement toward or away from the center. Hiebert explains, “First, the church would be defined by its center, the

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21Allison provides a diagram that pictures a continuum from false church to true church with a clear break between the two and degrees of purity for true churches along the continuum. See Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 4311-12.


23Ibid., 112.
Jesus Christ of Scripture. It would be the set of people gathered around Christ to worship, obey, and serve him. Precisely because they follow him, they form a covenant community characterized by righteousness, koinonia, and shalom.” In other words, a centered set definition of a church means she is centered upon Jesus as holy worshipers (righteousness), unified family (koinonia), and catholic and apostolic missionaries (shalom). The central relationship is with Jesus as Savior and Lord. The qualitative characteristics used to measure the health and direction of that relationship are the identities and markers of the church delineated in this research, and while much room exists for variation in health in each of those areas without becoming a false church, a final boundary marker must exist to distinguish the true from the false. So, what is it?

Defining the boundary is essentially delineating an ecclesiastical minimum upon which the Reformers reflected significantly in consideration of the Roman church and the budding protestant movement. Concerning this subject, Calvin ruminates:

But is it not wonderful that the term “Church,” which always implies unity of faith, should have been applied to the Galatians, who had almost entirely revolted from Christ? I reply, so long as they professed Christianity, worshipped one God, observed the sacraments, and enjoyed some kind of Gospel ministry, they retained the external marks of a church. We do not always find in churches such a measure of purity as might be desired. . . . And some are marked, not by a few spots, but by general deformity. . . . Yet our acknowledgment of societies to be churches of Christ must be accompanied by an explicit condemnation of everything in them that is improper or defective. The presence of the Gospel in message and ordinance can summarize the minimum presented by Calvin. The Gospel is lost without the recognition of Jesus as God who is one in three persons, and the presence of the message or ordinances, even when impure, possesses a ministry to the family and the watching world. Concerning these minimums, Avis explains, “The undeniable fact that the papists possess all these means of grace and yet have corrupted them all makes it impossible for Luther either to deny them the title of

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church at all or to concede them the title without qualification.”\(^{26}\) Certainly, though not without reservation, Luther acknowledges the Roman church as a true church due to the presence of the sacraments.

Today, Dever argues for the overarching understanding of the church based upon these same two points. He asserts, “The church is generated by the right preaching of the Word. The church is distinguished and contained by the right administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”\(^{27}\) Dever explains further the ecclesiastical minimum of the Gospel, especially as present in the ordinances:

When a church practices baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it obeys Christ’s teaching and example. In so doing, it portrays Christ’s death and resurrection, the testimony of every believer’s own spiritual rebirth, as well as the church’s collective hope for the final resurrection. These two practices, in short, proclaim the gospel. Thus, even congregations that have long forsaken biblical doctrine regarding regeneration, Christ’s substitutionary death, or the hope of heaven, still proclaim these truths in their liturgies as they reenact these signs. The new birth may be ignored, but baptism portrays it. Christ’s atonement may be denied in the sermon, but the Lord’s Supper proclaims it.\(^{28}\)

The ecclesiastical minimum that distinguishes a true from a false church is a community that gathers with the orthodox Gospel message and ordinances. Though a church may not have applied the Gospel holistically to her life and practice and may have areas of severe unhealthiness, so far as she remains orthodox, a true church exists, and as long as a true church remains, revitalization should be pursued.

Therefore, legitimate reasons to stop the pursuit of revitalization must be related to the Gospel. Overarching reasons to stop pursuing revitalization include the elimination of the Gospel message and ordinances or a holistic, enduring refusal to respond in repentance and belief despite patient and gracious confrontation with the Gospel message and ordinances. While otherwise revitalization should continue to be


\(^{28}\)Ibid., 783.
pursued by someone, individual ministers and lay people may legitimately be called to separate and no longer pursue revitalization in a particular local church based upon two other related grounds. Grudem argues for three reasons for separation: doctrinal, conscience, and practical. His arguments concerning doctrinal separation align with the previous discussion, and the practical and conscience issues are related and help form two other legitimate reasons to stop pursuing revitalization.

Concerning conscience, Grudem asserts, “Moreover, the command in 2 Corinthians 6:14 not to be yoked with unbelievers could also require a person to separate if the parent church became so dominated by those who gave no evidence of saving faith that such ‘yoking together’ could not be avoided.” If those in charge of the church prevent one from obeying God and His Gospel, then separation is necessary. Additionally, concerning practical issues, Grudem explains, “Christians may decide to separate from a parent church if, after prayerful consideration, it seems that staying in the parent church will very likely result in more harm than good. This could be because their work for the Lord would become frustrated and ineffectual due to opposition to it from within the parent church or because they would find little or no fellowship with others in that church.” Essentially, the final reason is the prevention of effective Gospel ministry. Thus, the legitimate reasons to consider for quitting the pursuit of the revitalization of a particular church are the loss of the Gospel message and ordinances,


30Ibid., 880-81.

31Ibid., 882.


33Bill Henard provides four questions that are helpful for pastors to consider when evaluating this final reason for personally stopping the pursuit of revitalization. First, “Am I the right person to lead this church? Sometimes, as difficult as it is to admit, not everyone is equipped, geared for, or able to lead a particular church at a particular time.” Second, “Can I make the cultural adjustment to this congregation?” Third, “Could I be a more effective leader in another church context?” Finally, “What type of church should I be leading.” Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live?* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 118-19.
the prevention of faithful Gospel obedience, and the hindrance of effective Gospel ministry.

**Illegitimate Reasons**

In light of the legitimate reasons and the ecclesiology presented previously, several possible reasons for ending the pursuit of revitalization exist. First, severe impurity in most areas of church life, though a difficult barrier to revitalization, is not a reason to quit the pursuit of revitalization. Unless the contamination rises to the level of a false church, then severe impurity should be expected in some cases and addressed for the sake of the glory of God, the good of her fellowship, and the betterment of her witness to the world. Second, revitalized churches are not typically as effective as new church plants in reaching the lost, and the resources invested are often significant. Revitalization may be considered poor stewardship in some cases. Others find that some churches have “outlived any further usefulness.” Yet, every church has been uniquely gifted by the Spirit and has the potential to play a distinct role in her context for glorifying God, strengthening the church, and reaching the world. Another reason is based upon a search missiology. If the mission of the church is to reach the lost or unreached peoples as fast as possible, then certainly wasting time with revitalization is wrongheaded. But, a search missiology misses a holistic understanding of the mission. The church’s mission cannot be fully accomplished apart from the revitalization of local churches.

Finally, Lovelace explains, “Some critics of the institutional church question whether it is possible for it to achieve disenculturation and would insist on new bottles to hold the new wine.” Disenculturation through application of the Gospel is a critical element in the revitalization of churches; thus, if new wineskins are required, then the

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35 Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 208.
hope for revitalization is undermined. Certainly, change is always required, and radical
change of the traditions and structures of a particular community is often necessary.
Nevertheless, the need for new wineskins is not a legitimate reason to quit pursuing
revitalization. Lovelace contends:

It is a practical certainty that every new gathering of Christians will recapitulate the
crisis of disenculturation experienced by the early church as recorded in Acts.
Unless new converts are persuaded to stop leaning on their culture and the law and
to lean fully on Jesus Christ in every phase of their lifestyle, their spiritual lives and
the mission of the church will inevitably be short-circuited by the process of
culturation. As for the old converts who are unconsciously trapped in hardened
shells of protective enculturation, it would be disloyalty to them (and to Christ’s
mission through them) to allow them to continue to exist without the full
deliverance available in Christ.36

Undergoing the process of disenculturation will be needed in every church at some point
or another. An ongoing process will help avoid a crisis that requires more significant
disenculturation; however, the solution is not only to plant new churches but also to
revitalize dying churches. The value of every believer requires this approach as well.
While reasons for ending revitalization efforts do exist, many are clearly illegitimate.

Implications: Means and Models for
Pursuing Church Revitalization

A growing base of works addresses various means and models for the pursuit
of church revitalization. If we combine that base with the wealth of church growth
materials, one can quickly become overwhelmed with innumerable suggestions for
growth and revitalization. Yet, Mitchell Chase addresses an important point:

Churches cannot experience healthy growth with just any type of building material.
“Each one should be careful how he builds,” Paul said (1 Cor 3:10b). The reason for
careful building is due to the nature of the foundation. The church’s foundation is
Jesus Christ. With church growth, then, one must factor in this reality: “For no one
can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor
3:11). Not all materials used to build on a foundation necessarily cohere with the
nature of that foundation.37

While contexts and problems may vary widely, the primary means and models for

36Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 208.

37Mitchell Chase, The Gospel is for Christians (Brenham, TX: Lucid Books, 2010), 185-86.
revitalization must be consistent with the biblical vision of the church and the reasons for revitalization developed from that vision. While the scope of this work does not allow a full treatment of the means or models for revitalization, essential means will be addressed, and several significant models will be evaluated.

**Essential Means**

The essential means for church revitalization are clearly established in Scripture. While other means may be needed in particular situations, the essential means considered here are universal for revitalization efforts, and other means must not undermine the foundational methods discussed here. Though not the means themselves, Conner expresses three key factors that must be addressed as evidenced in Paul’s ministry: “contextual,” “institutional,” and “spiritual.”

Every revitalization effort will address these factors in various ways and will do so through several essential means. These factors are helpful to recognize that the revitalization effort is not merely a doctrinal pursuit but also a practical one, and the essential means can and should address the various factors involved. While many research works highlight various key

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38 Tom Cheyney enumerates, "Here is the list of these diverse models: Pastor’s 180 Degree Transformation Church Revitalization Model, Evangelistic Outreach Church Revitalization Model, College Based Church Renewal Model, Pioneering Based Church Revitalization Model, Disciple-Making Church Revitalization Model, Cross-Cultural Based Church Revitalization Model, Best-Practices Church Revitalization Model, Change Coalition Church Revitalization Model, Apprentice or Intern Based Church Revitalization Model, Event Based Church Revitalization Model (Catalytic Event Models), The Missional Sunday School Based Revitalization Model, Small Growth Group Revitalization Model, Leader Development Church Revitalization Model, Preaching Points for Deacons Revitalization Model, Utilizing Lay Ministers Revitalization Model, Staff Member Based Church Revitalization Model, Critical Path Church Revitalization Model, Team-Building Church Revitalization Model, Leaving a Legacy Church Revitalization Model, Associational or Network Based Church Revitalization Model, Spiritual Renewal Church Revitalization Model, Healthy Church Revitalization Model, Church Revival Revitalization Model, Where God is Already at Work Church Revitalization Model, Relationship Based Church Revitalization Model, The Restart Based Church Revitalization Model, Replanting Church Revitalization Model, The High Impact Based Church Revitalization Model, Organizational Learning Revitalization Model, Program Driven Revitalization Model, Portable Church Based Church Revitalization Model, Multi-site Church Revitalization Model, Church Merger Revitalization Model, Affinity Based Church Revitalization Model, Mother to Daughter Based Church Revitalization Model, Breaking Growth Obstacles Church Revitalization Model, Relocation Church Revitalization Model, [and] Bi-vocational Church Revitalization Model." Tom Cheyney *Thirty-Eight Church Revitalization Models for the Twenty-First Century* (Orlando: Renovate Publishing Group, 2014), 6-8.

characteristics of revitalized churches, the highlighted markers are not means to revitalize other churches merely because they work pragmatically but because they are means that are rooted in the identities that God has given His church for the sake of health, growth, and revitalization. The following essential means will be addressed: the corporate gathering, the Word of God, biblical leadership, reliance on the Spirit in gifts and prayer, church membership, church confessions, evangelism, and intentional discipleship. Utilizing these means in biblical, creative, and intentional ways is essential for the revitalization of churches.

Prior to addressing these essential means, the priority of God’s glory must be realized. Considering the doxological nature of every identity of the church, the means utilized to cultivate the revitalization of the people of God must promote the glory of God. The means will make much of God by often grating against the wisdom of the world, not relying upon celebrity pastors or personalities with which much of our culture is so infatuated, and using tools that promote reliance on God. Additionally, means that are consumeristic or man-centered are out of bounds. As churches are to be oriented to God’s glory and centered upon Jesus Christ, efforts for revitalization must be as well.

First, the corporate gathering of a church is an essential means not only for worshiping God, which is first and foremost, but also for the revitalization of God’s people as worshipers, family, and missionaries. The corporate gathering must never become merely a means; yet, it must be intentionally utilized for the sake of revitalization to the glory of God. Wilson argues, “Since doctrines rule our life together, they interpret our experience, rather than our experience interpreting our doctrine. . . . [And] theology is the language of faith, not language about faith.” Our theology needs regular realignment with God’s Word in both language and practice. Thus, Wilson emphasizes the importance

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40See Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, Transformational Church, and Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, Comeback Churches. The findings in each work can be summarized under the three identities provided in this biblical vision for revitalization.

of the regular corporate gathering: “The place where we gather to relearn and correct our language is worship. Among many other things, worship is a concentrated lesson in the language of faith. . . . [And] in worship all our language and practices together teach us what the world really looks like and is according to the Gospel.” 42 The corporate worship gathering is an essential means for revitalization because it has been established as a means for individual and corporate realignment of our heads, hearts, and hands with what God has created us to be as worshipers, family, and missionaries.

Unfortunately, dying churches often have anemic corporate gatherings that are wrongly focused on the preferences of the attendees or on the maintenance of comfort through tradition. Church revitalizers must focus upon reshaping the corporate gathering in such a way that first and foremost God is clearly portrayed as holy, loving, beautiful, just, and worthy; that members are reminded of their family relationships and engaged in encouragement; and that the world is engaged with the Gospel during the gathering and through the sending of members into the world.

Next, the dying church must recover the love for and likeness of Jesus, and the Word of God is absolutely essential for this purpose and for guiding the entire revitalization process. At the core of this means is the Gospel. Lovelace asserts, “the proclamation of the Gospel in depth is the most important condition of the renewal of the church.” 43 Each of the preconditions and primary elements of renewal that he proposes are central points of the Gospel. 44 Avis explains that the Reformers’ view was essentially the same: “One thing is needful; all else is secondary. To save the Gospel. All outward forms of order and structure are expendable.” 45 Also, John Owen maintains, “Holiness is

42 Wilson, Why Church Matters, 71-72.

43 Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 145.

44 Lovelace provides a model for continuous renewal. The preconditions of renewal are an "awareness of the holiness of God and the depth of sin." The primary elements of renewal are a full grasp of the gospel, especially "justification, sanctification, the indwelling spirit, and authority in spiritual conflict" as a result of our victory in Christ. Ibid., 75.

45 Avis, Reformers, 3.
nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the Gospel in our souls." The earlier study of Revelation exhibited the keys to victory that Jesus provides His churches: Gospel-powered, motivated, diagnosed, and directed. Each creedal mark of the church and her identities are dependent upon the authoritative and sufficient Word of God and its core message, the Gospel, being applied to our individual and corporate lives.

While Scripture brings life to the church, it also opposes her in significant ways. Allison expounds upon this well: “Of course, the Word of God not only stands against false teachers and their false teachings; it stands over the disobedience, faithlessness, pride, underdevelopment, legalism, selfishness, xenophobia, lethargy, and other sins of the church and its members. Appropriately, the Bible is ‘our adversary’; it always confronts with existential demands for reformation.”

When a church is dying, the adversarial work of the Word is exactly what she needs. The Spirit working through the Word is the primary source for the revitalization of churches. Thus, revitalization can be pursued through intentionally cultivating a community that treasures God’s Word as authoritative and sufficient. In light of that, several strategies will be presented for revitalizing churches by leading them to treasure God’s Word.

In Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson’s extensive study of revitalized churches, they definitively exhibit that “comeback churches practiced biblical preaching... [that is], communicating the Word of God in a biblically faithful, practical, and relevant way.” This statistical research supports Michael Ross’ thesis statement in his work concerning revitalization’s relationship with preaching: “True church revitalization can never

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take place and be maintained unless it is the product of a biblical pulpit.” If one attempts to lead a church to renewal apart from prioritizing expository preaching of God’s Word, then he will fail every time. Expository preaching is a significant manifestation of a church or at least church leadership that treasures God’s Word and a means for cultivating a submission to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Prioritizing expository preaching is essential for revitalization. Ross rightly grounds his argument in the priority the New Testament writers placed on preaching in their ministries (Matt 24:14, Luke 24:47, Acts 28:31, 1 Cor 1:21, and 2 Tim 4:1-4). In light of this, Ross spends an entire chapter arguing for and giving practical ways to implement a “well-planned, purposeful diet of spiritual truth preached with deliberate intent.”

What does that kind of preaching diet look like in the process of revitalization? Preaching through specific, particularly relevant, books of the Bible is helpful throughout the process, especially at the beginning. For one will not only be teaching people how to study and revere Scripture but also avoiding the appearance of picking on anyone in particular since the Scripture is determining the issues that are addressed. Yet, preaching through books should not be the only way one leads a revitalization preaching ministry. Preaching topically or thematically with an expositional approach is typically needed in a revitalization work. Specific areas of weakness need to be addressed in this way. Ross suggests five broad categories that will be needed in order to revitalize: Christological, ecclesiastical, missiological, doctrinal, and ethical. Of course, as Leeman asserts, “One must be careful when seeking to preach topically because often preachers will end up preaching their point rather than the passage, but that does not mean topical preaching is

49Michael F. Ross, Preaching for Revitalization: How to Revitalize Your Church through Your Pulpit (Glasgow: Mentor, 2006), 19.

50Ibid., 41.

51Ibid., 57.

52Ibid., 75.
In light of all this, a strategic plan should be put in place to cultivate revitalization through the ministry of expository preaching so that churches will develop a love for the authority and sufficiency of God’s Word and, as a result, will be renewed. Having heard the Word of God and beginning to understand and value its authority and sufficiency, churches must evaluate the disparity between Scripture’s standard and their reality. While the necessity of evaluation in light of God’s Word is true for all of God’s churches, it is especially relevant and urgent for dying churches. Norman Shawchuck asserts, “There is perhaps no other single activity you can do in your church that has greater potential for generating energy for action than has congregational assessment.” Churches hoping for revitalization must not only be Gospel and Word-powered, motivated, and directed but also be Gospel and Word-diagnosed.

Having developed a culture of communicating the Word and utilizing it for evaluation, a congregation must respond to the Word appropriately through repentance, faith, and obedience. Unfortunately, repentance, especially corporate repentance, is not typically accentuated in revitalization material. Yet, Harry Reeder insightfully states, “In fact, in the history of a declining or dead church, some things were almost always dead wrong—which means that the church is in need of repentance. This is not as depressing as it sounds because it presents an opportunity for God to do a new and exciting work in the church when we humble ourselves, repent, and pray (cf 2 Chron. 7:14).”

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J. I. Packer establishes the necessity of and a vision for corporate repentance based upon the Old Testament. He does this by outlining the consistent theme of the prophets: "corporate repentance, made necessary by communal sin," which involves “I am your covenant God. . . . I require you to keep my law always, for I am your holy Lord and Judge. . . [and] I have discerned in you disbelief of my words and disobedience to them.”57 Though prior to the existence of the church, this pattern sets an example for the church. This is confirmed by the call from Jesus for repentance in the letters of Revelation. Peters asserts that Jesus’ message to the church “highlights repentance as one of the tasks of the church, especially when any of its members (as in the case of the five churches) have failed to maintain their faithfulness.”58 While other passages establish this necessity as well, theological reasons exist, too. Primarily, Gregg Allison expresses the necessity of repentance in the local church based upon her characteristic identity as the holy bride of Christ.59 In order to pursue purity as Scripture has laid forth as well as revitalization and ongoing renewal, the church must repent when sin is present.

While the Spirit must move in the hearts of church members before repentance will occur, leaders must seek to apply the means of grace that God has given the church that lead to repentance. Certainly, the primary means to cultivate repentance is hearing the Word of God and evaluating in light of it. As Ryken points out, “A good sermon serves to ‘correct, rebuke and encourage’ (2 Tim. 4:2).”60 Having already covered these aspects, though, the one additional tool worth mentioning is Richard Owen Roberts’ suggestion of the solemn assembly based upon examples seen in Old Testament revivals

57J. I. Packer, Taking God Seriously: Vital Things We Need to Know (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 83.


59Allison, Sojourners and Strangers, locs. 4259-63.

60Ryken, City On a Hill, 47.
and the history of the church. Roberts describes the situation leading to the need for a solemn assembly much like the decline in faithfulness that has occurred in most dying churches. A solemn assembly is an intentional period in which the congregation will sacrifice time and other normal activities, fast from food, and devote themselves to prayer. The key to the assembly is the steps leading to an occasion for corporate repentance. Roberts explains:

In preparation for this, a catalogue of sins to be corporately confessed and put away should be prepared in advance. Some churches have solicited the involvement of the entire congregation in this catalogue. Various entities within the fellowship have been asked to prepare lists of the offenses against both God and man that they know the church has never corporately put away. The leaders have then gone over these lists and compiled them into a catalogue. The intent is not to manufacture wrongs but to seriously investigate any and all matters that might have contributed to the righteous judgment.

While this method may not be appropriate for every situation, the principles are derived from the Scriptures and provide some helpful tools for cultivating repentance in the life of a congregation.

A church that centers itself on the Word of God by the pursuit of treasuring the Word through communication, evaluation, and repentance is applying an essential means for revitalization. She will discover and eliminate sin in the camp, thus growing in holiness. She will realign with right doctrine, thus growing in apostolicity. And she will cultivate right practices among her members and toward the world, thus growing in unity and catholicity respectively.

Third, biblical leadership centered upon Jesus is another essential means for revitalization. Jesus is the chief shepherd and has provided undershepherds for the well-being of His flock. Biblical leadership is an essential element because pastors that oversee the flock are gifts from Jesus to ensure a church’s health or recovery of health.

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62 Ibid., 3.

63 Ibid., 7-8.
Pastors are to communicate the Word and equip the saints for the sake of greater holiness, unity, catholicity, and apostolicity. Other leaders, especially deacons, are called to come alongside pastors to lead their church to evaluate and respond to the Word accordingly. Biblical leadership will provide vision and direction for the congregation that aligns with God’s vision for the church. Reordering and restructuring the human, financial, and physical resources of a church will likely be required as part of this leadership. The leaders must not only equip the members but also mobilize them for ministry, corresponding to their gifts and the church’s vision and mission. Certainly, much more can be said concerning the character and tasks of biblical leadership for the work of revitalization; yet, one must recognize its essential nature for revitalizing churches.

Fourth, reliance on the Spirit is crucial. Apart from the empowerment of the Spirit, all the other means are powerless. The Spirit equips churches with the confidence for continual renewal in all their identities. The Spirit empowers endurance, comprehension, sanctification, and ministry. He gives hope for holiness as He applies the Word of God to the hearts of His people (Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). The Spirit cultivates unity within a church through the empowerment of her members with spiritual gifts. He promotes hope for the catholicity and apostolicity of churches by providing boldness (Acts 4:31) and producing fruit through the witness of their members. Reliance upon the Holy Spirit is actualized through dependency upon the Word, prayer, and gifts. Dying churches must refocus and devote themselves to prayer, and the spiritual gifts of the congregation must be recognized and mobilized.

Next, having considered the means based upon the church’s identity as worshipers, two crucial measures concerning family must be examined. However, none of the means are completely independent because the unity and purity of a church are not independent. Based upon Ephesians 4:12-16, Lovelace explains, “The unity and purity of the church are interdependent and can only be obtained together. The catalyst essential for this attainment is live orthodoxy. This is Paul’s thrust in the greatest biblical text on
unity and orthodoxy, which still shines before us as a vision of the terminal grandeur of the church, for which all its past history seems like a disorderly rehearsal.” \[64\] Thus, the following two familial-based means are essential yet interdependent with the other identity-based means.

The proper view and manifestation of church membership must be cultivated. Surely, this effort will take time, but growth in healthy church membership will strengthen the family of a church. Ortlund maintains, “The family of God is where people behave in a new way. I think of it with a simple equation: Gospel + safety + time. The family of God is where people should find lots of gospel, lots of safety, and lots of time.” \[65\] Local church membership based upon a covenant is the central means for providing the combination of Gospel, safety, and time within a community. Only within local church membership can biblical unity and the one-another commands of the New Testament be truly manifested.

Additionally, corporate confession is an essential means for promoting holistic church revitalization. Allison asserts, “To voice a common confession of faith as the church assembles together and in continuity with the church throughout the ages stimulates and demonstrates the unity of the body of Christ.” \[66\] Recognition and comprehension of the unifying beliefs of a church by its members is vital for unity and overall health. While a verbal corporate confession repeated together is only one method to promote this effort, unifying around a common confession of faith in actuality, rather than a mere statement in a church’s organizational documents, is vital.

Finally, two remaining essential means are derived from the missionary identity of the people of God. First, evangelism must be practiced. Leaders must set the example, cast a vision, develop an urgency, and equip the people for not only organized

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\[64\] Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 287


evangelistic efforts but also intentional and regular organic evangelism throughout the individual members’ lives. Apart from evangelism, churches will inevitably decline. Their disobedience to the mission of the church will result in distortion elsewhere as well. On the positive side, those who convert to Christ through evangelistic efforts will provide new life in a weary, declining church. New believers are often eager to share their newfound faith, and if mobilized well, they can provide further examples of faithful evangelism and multiply fruitfulness.

Nonetheless, means for accomplishing the mission cannot end with evangelism. Members must be equipped and mobilized for intentional discipleship. Older believers must engage younger believers in relationships that center upon the Word and prayer for the sake of encouragement, accountability, and development. This kind of discipleship can occur in many forms: small groups, one-on-one relationships, and even corporate worship. The key is intentional development of one’s knowledge of, love for, and obedience to God. Apart from in-depth relationships that intentionally cultivate a growing relationship with God and His people, the holiness, unity, catholicity, and apostolicity of churches will falter. Ultimately, each essential means, the corporate gathering, the Word of God, biblical leadership, reliance on the Spirit, church membership, church confessions, evangelism, and discipleship, must be utilized to promote holistic church revitalization. Though other means may be helpful, revitalization cannot be accomplished apart from these eight essential means.

**Revitalization Models**

Overarching approaches to engaging dying churches have been proposed and utilized; however, is every strategy a legitimate or effective pathway toward revitalization? In order to promote true revitalization, one must align the model with the biblical vision for the church. A model that does violence to any significant aspect of the biblical understanding of a church does not qualify as a biblical revitalization model.
Unfortunately, language and definitions concerning proposed models are not consistent. Cheyney discusses thirty-eight different models. Rainer summarizes models into three categories:

**Acquisitional revitalization.** . . . [is when] another church acquires the existing church in need of revitalization. Sometimes the doors of the existing church are closed for a season. The church then reopens, possibly with a new name, but definitely with new leaders. . . . **Covenantal revitalization.** . . . [is when] the existing church, led by an objective person (often an outsider), agrees to make some significant changes. The leadership actually signs a covenant, and the congregation affirms the covenant. . . . **Organic revitalization.** . . . is the most common taken today. The church may try new methodologies and approaches. But resistance is common because most of the members really don’t want change.

R. Albert Mohler refers to revitalization in various models as replanting, and others, such as Cheyney, define it more specifically. Mark Clifton delineates four “replanting pathways:” “Give the Building to a Church Plant,” “Share the Building with a Church Plant,” “Merge with a Church Plant,” and “Replanting from Within.” In light of the high degree of variation, I will define and evaluate five summary categories of revitalization models as well as suggest some large-scale initiatives to promote a movement of biblical revitalization.

First, revitalization can be pursued through extended labor. This model is equivalent to Rainer’s “organic revitalization.” Extended labor is a long-term, intentional effort to revitalize a church. Through utilizing the means addressed above and more, leaders and lay-people work toward renewed health as worshipers, family, and

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67Cheyney *Thirty-Eight Church Revitalization Models*, 6-8.


70Cheyney explains, “While the replanting strategy is similar to the restart strategy, the big difference is that this model is seeking to start a new congregation or multiple congregations utilizing the present facility of the former church.” Cheyney *Thirty-Eight Church Revitalization Models*, 87.


72Rainer, “Three Types of Church Revitalization.”
missionaries. This model is the traditional method for pursuing revitalization, and often, the effort is undertaken by pastors who recognize the need while the members do not. Due to no recognition for the need for change, the members require more time and patience to lead toward revitalization. Usually, this model is led by a pastor with vision for revitalization, but lay-led efforts are possible but extremely difficult. Though difficult and often painful, the great reward of extended labor revitalization is the renewed witness in the community in connection to the historical presence of that local church as well as the renewal of the membership as a whole. Unfortunately, some approach the extended labor model with little patience and a view of the congregation as scaffolding for their vision. Reeder explains:

Among the pastors attempting revitalization projects, I have encountered two very different perspectives on the congregation. Some pastors view their inherited members as a scaffold on which they must temporarily stand while they build a new work. The older members are seen as an expendable entity. If they become part of the new work, fine. But those who do not fit into the new work are, like scaffolds, dismantled and cast aside. I consider this ‘scaffold’ perspective a callous misuse of Christ’s church. . . . So the perspective I recommend is one in which the inherited congregation is viewed as a foundation for the potential congregation. These people are not leftovers, but a flock of God that has been suffering and is in need of the healing touch of a shepherd.73

The value of every member of Christ’s body is undermined when approaching revitalization with a scaffolding perspective, and as a result, scaffolding is an illegitimate approach to extended labor revitalization.

The second model for pursuing revitalization is through replanting. I am defining replanting as a specific approach to revitalization that involves a closing and reopening with the membership remaining intact. As with Rainer’s acquisitional and covenantal models, replanting involves initial recognition of the need for revitalization by the membership at large. An intentional process to overhaul the life and structures of the church is implemented. Often, new leadership is recruited to lead the process and continue leading the church. Others might involve an outside coach guiding the current

73Reeder and Swavely, Embers to a Flame, 34-35.
leadership. The advantage of this approach is the ability to make significant changes; yet, the mere agreement by members on the front end does not entail complete lack of conflict. One must take care in this model to avoid complete disconnection to the past. Simply reopening with a new name, renovated facilities, and new ministries does not negate the need for repentance, and very possibly, public, corporate repentance. Additionally, the witness to the Gospel to make things new is significantly more evident if the connections are maintained to some degree. Nonetheless, not making those connections does not seem to rise to the level of delegitimizing it. Thus, a legitimate approach within the replanting category is what Tobin Perry defines as a “legacy church plant [which is] a church whose members decide to turn over leadership and become part of a new church.”

Third, church mergers are a growing trend, but are they a model for revitalization? The approach to a church merger is important to consider. While many are legitimate approaches to steward God’s resources well and to care for all of God’s flock, not every biblically-legitimate approach can be considered revitalization. If continuity from the churches is completely lost, then revitalization may not be the best term for the merger; yet, the approach is still a valid consideration for true churches of almost any degree of health. Mergers that maintain leadership and membership continuity from both churches to varying extents are legitimate forms of revitalization. On the other hand, when two churches merge into one body and one building yet lose the majority of members from one of the two churches, the approach loses its definition as a merger and certainly as revitalization. At this point, the merger has essentially become an acquisition, which brings us to our next model.

Church acquisition is mentioned in Perry’s “Church Revitalization Glossary” as “Church Property Acquisition: [the] strategic purchase of closed church property for

use by new church plants.”  

Certainly, when churches are closing their doors, a final act of stewardship is a biblical act. Acquisition is a tremendous tool for repurposing property, but as a model of revitalization, it is illegitimate. Some congregations should consider this option if efforts at revitalization have not worked or the financial situation is too dire to address in any other way, but the legacy gift should not be considered revitalization.

Fifth, revival dependence, an approach that waits for the Holy Spirit to provide a special outpouring of power in the unchanged life and structure of a church, is an approach some take to experience revitalization. Yet, this passive mindset fails not only to differentiate between revival and revitalization but also to utilize the means and do the work the church is responsible to do. A revival will bring revitalization to a church, but the pursuit of revitalization is not dependent on it and should not wait passively for it.

Finally, some large-scale strategies are needed to cultivate a movement of revitalization. Casting a clear vision for why the revitalization of churches must be pursued is a consistent aspect within each strategy because without being captivated by the why, a movement will never be formed. Three primary strategies on three different levels are needed: developing revitalization pastors, providing coaching, and training and sending revitalization core teams. First, churches, associations, and conventions need to intentionally develop revitalizers in addition to planters. Pastors who are leading a revitalization effort have an incredible opportunity to identify potential revitalizers, impart to them a vision for revitalization, and train them through the hands-on experience. As qualified and trained men are developed in churches, associations can utilize the close relationships of churches to plant revitalizers in churches that need it;

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76Cheyney calls this model the “Leaving a Legacy Church Revitalization Model.” Cheyney Thirty-Eight Church Revitalization Models, 61-62.

77Cheyney calls this model the “Church Revival Revitalization Model.” Ibid., 76.

thus, a greater degree of trust will be present from the beginning. Conventions, specifically seminaries, must develop conferences and curricula that will cast vision and equip for revitalization.

Second, coaching can be provided for new revitalizers on several levels. Perry suggests a “network of healthy church pastors mentoring and coaching Legacy churches.”

80 Even better, experienced revitalizers in local churches can provide coaching to new pastors. Directors of Mission could be reoriented to be coaches for revitalizers in the association. Additionally, associations could create peer-cohorts that are led by a coach. State conventions can provide coaching as many already do, and seminaries should consider providing coaching for a couple of years to graduates or students who begin pastoring declining churches.

Lastly, training and sending revitalization core teams and/or resources to churches in need of revitalization can happen on multiple levels. Thriving churches could adopt churches in decline and help by providing a team of trained lay-people, and possibly, a pastor. Often, the loss of critical mass and trained leaders is a major hindrance to revitalization efforts; thus, creating core teams as in church planting is a significant strategy to consider for the sake of a movement of revitalization. As churches are experiencing revitalization, a vision for sending people to plant and revitalize other churches should be an integral part of the effort. Associations could help cultivate this

79Cheyney writes, “Biblically, the primary place for the development of new church revitalizers is the local church or a cluster of churches. That is why I still believe in the importance of the local Southern Baptist Association. In this paradigm, just as church revitalizers personally embrace their God-given responsibility to build other church revitalizers, so healthy local churches must embrace their God-given responsibility to build their own future ministers. Some of the benefits are: Multiplication. The church-based revitalization approach provides a paradigm or model that can be multiplied virtually endlessly with every local church or cluster of churches providing a church revitalization-learning environment for their new leaders. If every local church would build only one or two new leaders for church renewal, the quantity crisis would be over! Holistic development. The church renewal learning process becomes considerably more effective since the local church provides the spiritual, relational and practical context for the development of the church revitalizer.” Cheyney, “Developing an Intentional Church Revitalization Paradigm.”


vision among churches and connect churches with a relational history and trust. Conventions and seminaries could provide resources on the development of core teams and the process of bringing one of those teams into a declining church which could look similar to Rainer’s covenantal revitalization.

**Conclusion**

The need for a movement of revitalization is urgent. Rainer exhorts, “Over 300,000 churches in America need significant revitalization. We cannot afford to do nothing.” The biblical burden for revitalization is clear. As worshipers of God who are centered upon Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, as family with one another, and as missionaries to the world, churches must heed the call to pursue revitalization. Pastors must commit to labor through various means and models to accomplish the task. A vision for revitalization must be cast in such a compelling manner that a generation of revitalizers, pastors and lay-people alike, might be mobilized, and multitudes of declining churches might be transformed for the glory of God, the good of His people, and the expansion of His kingdom.

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82Rainer, “Three Types of Church Revitalization.”
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ABSTRACT

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR THE REVITALIZATION OF CHURCHES

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With thousands of churches dying every year in North America, many pastors have started exploring the concept of church revitalization. Methodology books are beginning to fill the shelves of Christian bookstores, and as many pastors find themselves at churches in need of revitalization, these resources are valuable tools. Nonetheless, merely reacting to finding oneself in a dying church will not help stem the tide overall. A movement of revitalization is required if the large number of churches dying each year is going to subside. In order for a biblical movement to be cultivated and begin to flourish, the problem must be identified clearly in a biblical and theological argument, and motivation and zeal must flow from this biblical source. This dissertation seeks to provide a biblical and theological vision for the revitalization of churches for the sake of feeding a movement of church revitalization. The primary basis for the vision is the nature of churches as worshipers of God, family with one another, and missionaries to the world.

Chapter 1 provides the purpose of this dissertation, the research questions, a definition of church revitalization. Chapter 2 establishes reasons for revitalization through an exploration of the nature of churches as worshipers of God. Chapter 3 argues for revitalization based upon the nature of churches as family with one another. Chapter 4 demonstrates a vision for revitalization due to the nature of churches as missionaries to the world. Chapter 5 exhibits the biblical evidence for the ongoing necessity of
revitalization through an overview of renewal in the Old Testament, Paul’s ministry, and Revelation. Finally, chapter 6 provides implications of this vision concerning legitimate and illegitimate reasons to stop pursuing revitalization and concerning the proper means and models to pursue the revitalization of churches.
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