

Biblical Encouragement for Congregational Revitalization

By

George Bullard

Executive Director

Columbia Metro Baptist Association

GeorgeBullard@ColumbiaMetro.org

Does the Bible support congregational revitalization? Yes. Various passages support the need for people, families, tribes, and congregations to engage in renewal of their commitment to God, and to be on a dynamic journey as they seek to follow God's leading.

Here are biblical references I find useful in talking with congregational leaders about revitalization.

First, a pattern. As post-original sin people, and with the congregations composed of these people, our individual and organizational lives go through various patterns and cycles. One helpful biblical reference is Leviticus 25:1-12. These verses talk about engaging in six years of planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops of various kinds. Then a seventh year of sabbatical. In the 50th year - after seven cycles of seven years – it speaks to having a year of jubilee.

This pattern is helpful for congregations to consider from the time their church's life begins. They would be wise to hardwire into their life pattern taking a sabbatical every seven years to deeply reconsider the call of God upon their congregation. They should engage in a revitalization process. Then every 50 years to start over as a congregation with a fresh start.

Second, a journey. Just like Abram and his tribe in Genesis 12, congregations ought to respond to God's call to go on a journey to a new place of spiritual and strategic impact to reach their full kingdom potential. Congregations should never feel they have arrived. They always need to look for the new thing, the new initiative, and the new place where God would have them minister. Through continual innovation they experience the joy of being in the center of God's will. God will take them to places they would never have imagined.

Third, a rediscovery. The Acts of the Apostles provides numerous examples to evaluate the faithfulness and effectiveness of congregations, and the stages of their development. Acts 2:41-46 talks about what I call the characteristics of the uncommon church who is on a prophetic journey. It describes the wonderous life of the very early church. The very early church focuses on congregational expressions before the followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch in chapter 11.

The huddled – yet scattered – very early church had an uncommon experience with God's Word as the Apostles recounted the life and teachings of Jesus. An uncommon and special life of fellowship. An uncommon prayer life of spiritual support and discernment of God's leading. An uncommon worship of our Triune God. An uncommon expectation of the miraculous. An uncommon generosity that soared beyond the Old Testament concept of a tithe as ten percent. Finally, an uncommon witness to family, friends, and in the marketplace.

Congregations regularly revitalize their gathered and scattered life in keeping with the uncommon and special characteristics of the very early church.

Fourth, a shift. By Acts chapter six the uncommon very early church had become common. Just like so many congregations today. They established patterns, and were blind to the need to change. When it addressed caring for the Greek speaking widows, the church had to change their comfortable culture. Seven shifts that start with the letter "D" were addressed – dynamic, discipleship, disruption, diversity, discovery, designate, and demonstrate.

They had to recognize the *dynamic* nature of God's world and His Church. Turning irreligious people into fully devoted *disciples* was a process and not just an event. The very early church was willing to *disrupt* the culture around them. As they were successful in connecting people to Jesus they became a fellowship of *diversity*.

They *discovered* new types of ministry opportunities. They needed to *designate*, nominate, and even draft more people into leadership. Finally, they became willing to *demonstrate* the love of God across language, cultural, national, and religious barriers.

In just these few examples of biblical encouragement for congregational revitalization, where is your congregation today? What are the challenges you face to revitalization from the first sabbatical in your congregational life, to where you find yourself today?