

PREVIEW

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FOREWORD BY MARK DEVER

REVITALIZE

**BIBLICAL KEYS TO HELPING
YOUR CHURCH COME ALIVE AGAIN**

ANDREW M. DAVIS

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“*Revitalize* is not for the faint of heart. It will put iron in your backbone at the same time that it calls you to bend your knees before the Lord who alone can build his church. Written by a man of courage and faith, *Revitalize* reflects the realities of pastoral scars while extolling the beauty and power of Christ’s wounds to inspire a new generation of pastoral warriors. Don’t look for simplistic techniques in these pages, but drink deeply of the pool of Andy Davis’s pastoral experience that sparkles with biblical priorities on which Christ builds and rebuilds his church.”

—Bryan Chapell, pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church

“The American landscape is filled with churches that are plateaued and declining. Thousands of congregations are in need of the sort of spiritual revitalization that can only be led by godly pastors and empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, I’m thrilled that Andy Davis has written this timely book. Andy was my pastor for a decade at First Baptist Church of Durham. The final four of those years we served together as elders, where I witnessed ‘up close and personal’ the prayerful implementation of the principles found in this book. *Revitalize* offers a great balance of Scriptural principles, real-life stories from the pastoral ‘front line,’ and practical application. I pray this book becomes a valuable resource and a source of encouragement for pastors and lay leaders who long to see their own churches revitalized.”

—Nathan A. Finn, dean of the School of Theology
and Missions, Union University

“Andy Davis is an amazing man with an amazing story. I watched the revitalization of First Baptist Church of Durham from afar. As I read this book, I was freshly moved by this compelling account of what God did in that place through the faithful labors of this pastor. This book tells that story. *Revitalize* contains not only the story but also many wise and essential lessons about the important work of church revitalization from a thoughtful, courageous pastor who grew from this remarkable journey. I can confidently commend this work, as well as the man who lived it.”

—Brian Croft, senior pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church;
founder, Practical Shepherd; senior fellow, Mathena Center
for Church Revitalization, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“With a title like *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again*, you’d expect a ‘manual’ of best practices on ‘how to’ revitalize a plateaued or dying church. Instead, Andy Davis leads us through the Bible, preparing pastors, church leaders, and church members to be the kinds of vessels useful to God in his revitalization project. If you want a best practices book on what *you* can do to revitalize a church, you’ll need to look elsewhere. But if you want to be the kind of person *God* uses to revitalize his church, then you’ve got the right book.”

—Juan R. Sanchez, senior pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church

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REVITALIZE

BIBLICAL KEYS TO HELPING
YOUR CHURCH COME ALIVE AGAIN

ANDREW M. DAVIS



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Foreword

I like this book. I like this book for a number of reasons. I like this book because it exalts God. Andy Davis is both ambitious and cautious—ambitious for what God might do and cautious of any talk of what we can do in our own strength. He is convinced that revitalizing a local church is not something he could do himself. He knows that such work is something that only God can do. And this book is clear on that.

I like this book because it is biblically and theologically sound and historically informed. And it's more than that. It is instructive. How many times does a pastor reach for a practical book and find the author is actually carefully and accurately instructing from the Bible? What a wonderful and, sadly, unusual find!

I like this book because the author understands both what the gospel is and what a church is. Those particular matters of theology that come to focus in the local church are clear in this book, and they are combined with lessons from the

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author's own life. Which brings me to another reason I like this book.

I like this book because it is practical. Some books wrap a single idea or two in 150 or 200 pages. This book is the opposite. Each chapter is stuffed full of ideas that local pastors will understand and can actually use. You don't need to attend special "Andy Davis seminars" to know how to apply the wisdom in this book. Davis's humility and humor help the reader relate to the lessons he has learned and shares.

I like this book because I think it will help pastors. It joins a fairly elite group of books—like C. H. Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's *Preaching and Preachers*—that combine theology and practice as only a learned and experienced pastor can. Reading this book may well be one of the chief means God uses to not only prevent you from being fired or quitting but also bring new life to your local church. I'm pretty sure Satan won't want you to read this book!

Finally, I like this book because I like Andy Davis. I've known Andy for more than thirty years and have never failed to appreciate his love for God and his confidence in God's Word. I know the story he recounts here to be true. I got the phone calls and letters and had numerous personal visits through the years he describes. And all that he shares here is what I saw and knew in those years. It is a story of real dependence on God and humility so profound it allowed Andy to speak God's Word in confidence even while his flesh was trembling. He shares soberly the challenges but never crosses over into being melodramatic or self-important.

So read this book. Use it as a diagnostic tool in regard to your own church and ministry. It is a Christ-exalting and

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pastor-encouraging read. Andy Davis's experience is marshalled to serve pastors. This is an important work on an important topic. It is a guidebook that may hold the secret to your own survival. Humility, wisdom, and love are all found in these pages, and you'll need all three to understand and apply the lessons in this book. God may use this book to answer your church's prayers for new life. I pray that is the case. Read and prosper, brother pastor. Read and prosper. And thanks, Andy, for living the life you describe here and for taking the time and effort to share it now with us.

Mark Dever

Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC
Reformation Day (October 31, 2015)

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1

Eyes of Blazing Fire

*The Zeal of Christ
to Revitalize His Church*

In the first chapter of Revelation, the apostle John has an awesome vision of the resurrected Christ walking among seven golden lampstands with eyes like blazing fire and his feet like burnished bronze. Christ is dressed in a priestly robe reaching down to his feet, with a golden sash around his chest. Perhaps most striking of all, Christ has a sharp double-edged sword coming from his mouth, and his voice is like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he holds seven stars. The seven golden lampstands represent the seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The seven stars in his right hand represent the “angels” of these seven churches.

In Revelation 2–3, Christ speaks to each of these seven churches through their respective angels. His messages are

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powerful, personal, and specific, addressing the strengths and weaknesses of each local church and giving both warnings and encouragements about the future. These seven churches were real local churches that existed during John's time in Asia Minor, near the island of Patmos, where John was in exile. However, there is also a clear sense that they represent Christ's intimate knowledge of and concern for each local church around the world throughout every era of church history. That the churches are depicted as golden lampstands shows their immense worth coupled with their role as lights shining in a dark place. Christ's walking in the midst of these seven golden lampstands illustrates his active concern for the churches, as well as his vigilant and dynamic ministry among them. The seven angels in Christ's right hand illustrate his sovereign power over the pastors of these churches.¹

How awesome, then, to see the resurrected Christ moving actively through these seven lampstands—tending them, dealing with their pastors, speaking words of comfort or rebuke to them. I submit that this vision, as well as the subsequent letters to the seven churches, represents Christ's ongoing work of church reformation. To some, Christ speaks words of commendation for their tireless labor, doctrinal accuracy, faithfulness in persecution, discernment of error, and hatred of compromise. To others, Christ speaks words of rebuke for their forsaking of their first love, doctrinal compromise, toleration of sinning members, worldliness, spiritual deadness, self-confidence in wealth, and lukewarmness. To all, Christ gives words of exhortation to continue in courageous progress in the gospel, to look to the sweet eternal rewards, and to hear the words God speaks to the churches by the Spirit.

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Eyes of Blazing Fire

Careful study of the letters to the seven churches provides powerful insight into Christ's zeal for the ongoing revitalization of the church in every age. Revelation 1–3 clearly indicates that the slide of local churches from health toward death has been an ongoing issue for twenty centuries. The church at Ephesus had forsaken its first love, and the Lord threatened to remove its lampstand if they refused to repent (Rev. 2:4–5). The removal of the lampstand is Christ's judgment on any church that, through sin, slides from life to death; Christ sovereignly removes them from the community, and they are gone. He has done this consistently throughout church history. Indeed, history indicates that by the third century, the church at Ephesus had possibly been removed. In any case, it was certainly gone by the time Islam had come to dominate that region of the world in the seventh century. False teachers infiltrated the church at Pergamum, and Christ threatened to come and wage war against them with the sword of his mouth (Rev. 2:14–16). The church at Thyatira was guilty of tolerating sexual immorality, and Christ threatened to throw any who sinned in this way on a sickbed resulting in death (Rev. 2:20–23). The church at Sardis was clearly in need of revitalization. Christ said, "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." And he warned them, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Rev. 3:1–2). Perhaps no church of the seven so clearly fits into the pattern of revitalization as that one. The church at Laodicea was lukewarm, and Christ threatened to spew them out of his mouth (Rev. 3:15–16). Local churches have stood in need of revitalization from the beginning of church history.

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Eyes of Blazing Fire

local church. No one knows this better than Satan, and therefore it is expected that he will be vigorously active in fighting reform efforts made in specific local churches. The battle lines are drawn, the enemy is active, and the war is on! As I will discuss later, one of Satan's most powerful weapons is discouragement. He wants to deceive us into thinking that the slow descent of a local church into coldness, doctrinal error, lifeless fellowship, and nonexistent witness in the world is inevitable. He has planted his double agents in dying churches, and these wolves in sheep's clothing are some of the bitterest and most subtle enemies of the gospel. We must expect a fight and not grow weary as it becomes shockingly ugly. Christ is greater, and his Word is sufficient. The goal of a healthy, fruitful Great Commission church is well worth the suffering. This book is written from a deep yearning to equip you for that fight, strengthen your hearts with solid food from God's Word, and guide you with wisdom and clear strategies for victory.

The church scene of the West in the twenty-first century is not encouraging. Christianity is in a decaying orbit in its formerly positive relationship with surrounding culture. Christian views on salvation, the exclusivity of Christ, sexual morality, the sanctity of human life, the nature and permanence of marriage, and the like, are less and less accepted. The steep decline in the health and fruitfulness of many local churches is both a cause and an effect of this decaying orbit. Church health cannot be reduced to baptism, attendance, and budget statistics; however, such numbers can be important indicators of health or disease. The Barna Group has shown that, while the US adult population has grown 15 percent over the last fifteen years, the number of unchurched adults

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has grown by 92 percent.² Mainline denominations (e.g., the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, et al.) have been seriously in decline in these areas for decades—an aggregate picture of the death of many previously flourishing local churches. Even denominations that have many healthy local churches (like the one our church is affiliated with, the Southern Baptist Convention or SBC) still show a general decline in these areas, and many historically influential churches are in serious need of revitalization. Thom Rainer asserts that somewhere between eight thousand and ten thousand churches close every year.³ The only remedies to this trend are church planting and church revitalization.

Revitalization vs. Normal Pastoral Ministry

What is “revitalization”? How is it different from normal pastoral ministry in a healthy church? These are key questions. It is not true that every church needs revitalization, for if that were so, the word would lose its distinctive meaning and cease to be helpful. No church is perfect, and every church could grow in faithfulness to Christ. When later I list elements of a healthy church, every true believer in Christ will acknowledge that they long for growth in each of those elements in their local church. Conversely, when I list elements of a church that needs revitalization, it is possible that many healthy churches see some of these reflected in their church life. But there is a composite level of church decline discernible from

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the elements enumerated below that indicates when a church is in need of revitalization.

One of the easiest ways to measure church vitality is by counting heads—membership and baptisms/conversions. If those numbers are flat (plateaued) or declining each year, that church may well be unhealthy, sliding toward eventual death. Ed Stetzer of LifeWay Research based his book on revitalization, *Comeback Churches*, on studies of three hundred churches that (1) had plateaued and/or declined for five years (worship attendance grew less than 10 percent in a five-year period); and (2) had followed that plateau/decline with significant numerical growth over two to five years, including a membership to baptism (conversion) ratio of 35:1 or lower each year and at least a 10 percent increase in attendance each year.⁴ Stetzer grounds the rest of his book on lessons learned by those three hundred churches. Much of the focus for the entire study centers around evangelistic fruit—what he calls being “missional.”

However, numerical growth alone cannot be a measure of spiritual health. Some of the unhealthiest churches in the nation are characterized by the false doctrine of the prosperity gospel, but they are huge and growing numerically.⁵ Conversely, some churches may be quite healthy in many respects and seeing steady fruit in evangelism but are actually shrinking in number because the godly leadership is culling bloated rolls of past members who, by their chronic failure to attend worship, are displaying in their lives that they most likely were not born again. Other churches might have a good number of people attending and might see some baptisms, but they are toxic in their daily life because of long-standing church politics and unhealthy attitudes and practices. Thus,

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Notes

Chapter 1 Eyes of Blazing Fire: The Zeal of Christ to Revitalize His Church

1. The word *angel* means “messenger,” and each of the letters Christ orders written to this or that church is written to the angel of that specific church. Christ would not be writing to a heavenly angel, so many interpreters feel that the angels of these seven churches are the elders or pastors of these churches. See John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1–11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 47–48.

2. “Five Trends among the Unchurched,” Barna, October 9, 2014, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/685-five-trends-among-the-unchurched.html>.

3. Thom Rainer, “13 Issues for Churches in 2013,” Church Leaders, accessed June 13, 2016, <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/164787-thom-rainer-13-issues-churches-2013.html>.

4. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), xiii–xiv.

5. The largest church in America is Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, with significantly questionable theology in the “word of faith” pattern. See John MacArthur’s critique of Joel Osteen quoted in Bill Combs, “Theologically Driven: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary,” September 22, 2014, <http://www.dbts.edu/blog/john-macarthur-on-joel-osteen/>.

Chapter 2 God Speaks Life into Dying Churches

1. Eighty percent of the Czech population has no religious affiliation at all, and surveys indicate about 1 percent are evangelical.

2. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, ed., “Theology of Revival,” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988).

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PREVIEW

by Andrew M. Davis

“I CAN’T RECALL EVER MAKING THIS STATEMENT ABOUT A BOOK: CHURCH LEADERS NEED THIS.”

—THOM S. RAINER, president and CEO, LifeWay Christian Resources

Church health is measured by more than just numbers, but declining membership is often a key symptom of a church in crisis. Drawing on lessons he’s learned in his own journey of leading church transformation, pastor Andrew Davis offers strategic, proven, and biblically grounded advice on how to move forward with hope and expectation. He shows pastors the importance of

- keeping Christ’s ownership of the church central
- maintaining a humble attitude
- choosing your battles wisely
- empowering godly men to join in leadership
- making prayer a priority
- focusing on the Word
- and much more

Revitalize gives pastors the spiritual support they long for and the practical advice they need to turn their churches around and position them for greater health in the future.

“Andy Davis has spent years in revitalization work, and in this book he makes what he has learned accessible to others. I welcome this solid new contribution to the growing literature on helping churches ‘come alive again.’”

—TIM KELLER, founding pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

“Andy Davis is a pastor who truly knows what it means to see God revitalize a church through the power of his Word. Pastors, no matter how experienced or inexperienced, need to read this book.”

—R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., president, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

ANDREW M. DAVIS is pastor of First Baptist Church of Durham, North Carolina, and a visiting professor of church history at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Chairman of the governance committee of the Gospel Coalition, Davis has written articles for TGC’s popular website and has spoken in plenary and breakout sessions at TGC’s national conference. He is the author of *An Infinite Journey*, named by Tim Challies as one of the top ten books of 2014.

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