

ANTIOCH: A CASE STUDY IN SPIRITUAL VITALITY
A RESPONSE IN VIEW OF 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

A Paper Presentation

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The number of possible ways to respond to Dr. Steven's research and writings related to the spiritual vitality in Antioch are numerous. Because of the brevity of this forum, I will limit my response to three areas: highlight ideas related to Antioch, an analysis of select current issues impacting spiritual vitality in the church of America today through the lens of the SBC, and possible issues and questions to address related to spiritual vitality in local churches.

The church is a spiritual organism, wearing organizational clothes, and made up of sinners most of whom have been saved by God's grace. These evident truths have implications for the local church ministry and leadership. As a spiritual organism, we need to know God intimately, how He runs the universe, and His purposes for the church and how to cooperate with Him as the Holy Spirit works in it. Because the church expresses itself organizationally, we need to give attention to handling organizational matters wisely, effectively and in accordance with the character, purposes and commands of God. Because the church has sinners, some saved and some not, we need to lead churches in a manner that not only helps the spiritually immature grow spiritually, but also in a manner which helps those without Christ participate and hear the claims of Christ without becoming leaders and without helping to set the values of the church.

In examining the church at Antioch, we can easily see the influence and leadership of the Spirit of God. As Stevens noted, the book of Acts does contain accounts of the church leaders being involved with discipleship, dealing with potential conflict, social responsiveness and missional activities. Additional factors also contributed to the spiritual vitality in Antioch.

Selected Factors:

- Pacesetter example of Paul and Barnabas
- Interdependence of followers of Christ
- Importance of meals together
- Missional focus of Paul

- New missions and churches baptize a higher percentage of people and more outwardly focused in general. This a current statistically significant fact and should lead us to emphasis church planting.
- Discipleship (as seen in change in behavior) is spurred on by their missional focus and not wanting to discredit the name/honor of Christ.
- Disconnected from the singular influence of the Jerusalem temple setting. Antioch could focus on essential matters without the encumbrance of extensive rituals and forms.

A church must concern itself with the priorities of God in order to be spiritually vital.

God has called us to the Great Commandment, Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate.

God as the creator of culture gave us responsibilities in handling the everyday, often mundane, affairs of life. We have to work, conduct family life, and carry out responsibilities as a member of society. As Rick Warren has written that every church needs to balance the five purposes (functions for me), so, too, we need to consider balancing or connecting the Great Commandment, Great Commission and Cultural Mandate. For the church not to intentionally give attention to each of these three areas would be a mistake and in fact is a mistake of various religious groups around the country.

Dr. Kelley has wisely called our attention to several related matters. He continues to say that the local church is the center of the Christian universe. He continues to remind us that 70% of our churches are plateaued or declining and now that is 89% based on Dr. Day's new criteria. He continues to emphasize the importance of developing leaders to produce healthy churches. I am in strong agreement with those constant reminders and continue to reflect on the part that seminary education plays in the overall picture of the Christian universe.

I know there are churches around the country that would be characterized as being spiritually vibrant churches. They are carrying on ministry under the leadership of the Holy Spirit in a way that is pleasing to the Lord and effective in impacting the natural and eternal lives

of those around them and across the globe. However, by most any measure typically used to examine spiritual condition, the Christian church in America is anemic at best.

Creating and sustaining a spiritually vibrant climate is a difficult task today, not just because of the condition of the modern church. Our cultural environment also hinders our efforts. The following are a few factors that we should consider....

- We live in a radically different culture than when most of our organizational structures were devised
- People do not share common Judeo-Christian values
- We live in a Biblically illiterate nation
- We are experiencing individualism on steroids, resulting in loss of community
- Most people do not believe in absolute truths in the spiritual realm
- The American family and extended family is in complete disarray
- People are more disconnected from people, especially people of wisdom than ever before
 - Societal trend of cocooning
 - More mobile society, therefore people do not know each other
- People perceive and determine reality and truth in very different ways
- Lost people are farther from the church than in the past
- Lost people are farther from the true God than in the past
- We live in a post-Christian and pre-Christian culture
- People perceive themselves as already spiritual and therefore not in need of the church

It is not my objective at this point to be critical or present our condition as without hope.

With God there is always hope. However, unless we recognize how sick we are, we may continue to believe that we can or should use home remedies to cure our possibly grave ailments.

Looking at the vital signs of the church indicates we are seriously ill.

I acknowledge in advance space prohibits me from being able to elaborate and provide additional documentations to support the following items which I believe demand that we rethink the way we do church. I would like to propose the following facts and observations support us going back to the basics/fundamentals of church in an effort to capture spiritual vitality and a missional focus. It is in this environment that we are seeking to create atmospheres for spiritual vitality in our local churches.

Reasons to consider new models and approaches toward spiritual vitality.

- We are failing in most areas of our mission.
 - Only 11% of SBC churches are experiencing healthy church growth (this is much less in most other denominations)
 - No county in America is more churched than it was a decade ago
 - It takes more Southern Baptists (43) to see a person baptized than it did before the conservative resurgence in 1979 (36) according to recent study by Thom Rainer. Ratio was 19:1 in 1950.
 - It takes several hundred Southern Baptists to evangelize an adult to first-time conversion and water baptism
 - Over 6,700 SBC churches did not baptize a single person in 2000
 - On any given Sunday, less than 15% of the population is sitting in any church's pew
 - Between 75-83% of the youth in our SBC churches will not be connected with a local church by the time they reach their early-mid 20s
 - The giving rate of the typical SBC family is 2-3%
 - There is little to no behavioral differences in those who claim Christ and those who do not
 - 50% of seminary graduates will not be in vocational ministry within 5 years after graduation
- People have changed, yet many of our methods have not changed in decades
- The church has little to no perceived value to lost people
- Christians and Christian churches have an identity and image problem
- Much of spiritual formation is built around a Western educational model that overemphasizes the knowledge aspect of learning to the neglect of the areas of affective and skills. At points we have also emphasized short-term behavioral change, to the shaping of values and perspectives of people, particularly youth.
- Our spiritual formation models have been influenced by ...
 - Models of Western Education
 - Models of Recovery and Therapy
 - Various Forms of Entertainment
 - Self-improvement Emphasis
- Our structure and church environment often hinders our efforts at spiritual formation
- The church has more competition than in the past for those looking for spiritual help
 - Non-Christians are looking to the East for spiritual answers
 - The number of spiritual choices has dramatically increased
- Our churches are being propped up by an aging population

Based on the diagnosis above, I would suggest we need a complete examination of most every area of Christian ministry, apart from our core doctrinal beliefs and our missional focus.

What matters in a military parade in Washington is different than what matters on the battlefield in Iraq. In peacetime many of the perfunctory activities may be important, but many of them

lose their luster in the midst of a fire-fight with bullets flying. As a church body in America, we are on mission to storm the gates of hell. However, many of our values, behaviors and concerns indicate we are at peace, not war. We are to be an advancing force, not on retreat.

For this particular paper, I would like to examine one particular structural way of viewing our attempts to make disciples. The following is a graph that depicts our typical efforts at disciple-making.

Insert Traditional Church Model Graph Here (sorry)

The large triangle represents a funnel of people in our churches, which participate in certain activities and ministries. As the number of items in which people participate increases (from top to bottom), the number of people who actually participates decreases, hence a funneling effect. We have been saying is that our objective as church leaders is to produce more disciples (church members) and it appears by default to say that we imagine to that we can produce them by providing quality ministries, activities and programming that will cause them to become a disciple. What we do know is that our system of disciple-making has not been effective in recent years. Many who have been participating faithfully in this type of structure (organizational priorities) are dissatisfied with their spiritual lives.

Not only does the earlier list indicate a spiritual dissatisfaction, but I would also suggest that the popularity of the Henry Blackaby's Experiencing God and Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life give support evidence. I have heard that there were as many Experiencing God books sold in 30 months as there was of J.I. Packer's Knowing God in 30 years.

Questions to Consider

Not biblically speaking, but in practical terms, Christian leaders define what is important and set the values of the church in part by how they structure or arrange priorities. Not biblically speaking, but in practical terms, Christian leaders also define what it means to be a Christian and disciple by their lives and what they prioritize. Assuming some type of funnel effect and recognizing the typical number of hours a person will give to their spiritual development and/or church involvement, what should be the priorities in the funnel triangle?

I recognize the limitations of providing generalizations, but it appears that many of the questions we have been seeking to address in our local churches and also at the seminary have changed through the years. Take my list; think through your own experience, develop your list.

- 50s&60s How do we make good church members of them?
- 70s What's wrong with some of them?
- 80s How do we draw them into a crowd?
- 90s How do we help them with life-skills?
- 00s How do we connect with and influence them outside the wall of our facilities?

I would like to suggest that in the midst of the examining every aspect of ministry in our radically different and every changing culture, we do some personal reflecting on some foundational questions for the church of the 21st century. I suggest you develop your own list, but the following are some that I continue to examine. These questions make the assumption that we are following the Bible as our final authority and seeking to address the following questions in light of the nature, ways and purposes of God.

Foundational Questions

- What are the essentials of being a Christian?
- What is a disciple and how do you make one?
- What is a church?

Key Questions

- What are the key values churches should embody?
- How does the church define success?
- Who is the primary target?
 - Lost/Saved, Churched/Unchurched

- Demographics & Psychographics
- Cultural Characteristics

Model Producing Questions

- Purpose: How do we reach people for Christ?
- Purpose: How do we develop people spiritually?
- Leadership: How church trains for ministry inside and outside the walls?
- Missional: How church relates to and multiplies its influence in its community and in world?
- Function: What is the primary purpose of the AM service?
- Function: What is the primary purpose of small groups?
- Organizational: How do we make decisions? And who
- Organizational: Where do people receive primary pastoral care?
- Developmental: Where is character shaped and correction given?
- Developmental: What are the expectations of new members?
 - To the Church
 - From the Church

BHAG has come to be an acronym for “Big Hairy Audacious Goals”. I would like to close with some BHAQuestions. Seeking to address these questions will have significant implications on (1) organizational structure, (2) leadership development, (3) how we seek to develop people spiritually and (4) how we create a values-shaping church, not just behavior shaping among other issues.

Could it be that in order for the church of America to become spiritually vibrant, we will need not only to consider various approaches to tinker with how we do church, but perform a complete overhaul in how we approach ministry? Could it be that instead of training seminary students across America to drive the church and provide them with a driver’s license for a car that is not running, we need to prepare them to do major overhauls and at points even teach them how to build a car?

Could it be that seminaries will have to not only rethink their courses and delivery methods, but the very core of what they are doing as they seek to address the needs of the students, the condition of local churches and the context of America in which most of them will seek to minister? Could it be that seminaries will have to evaluate their curriculum in light of the

missional focus we have lost and the anemic condition of the church in America when there is not a loud cry from the pews and most churches can still pay their bills? Could it be that seminaries across America are preparing students to sustain a church culture that is fading? Donald McGavran in Bridges of God challenges us to move from feeding institutions to fueling the movements of God, which may require a different skills set and philosophy of ministry than the typical seminary student is developing.

I would like to believe that we would see a significant turnaround on the church landscape by focusing on the four important areas of which Dr. Stevens brought to our attention from the church at Antioch: (1) discipleship emphasis, (2) conflict management, (3) social responsibility, and (4) mission initiative. However, I am in agreement with Dr. Stevens that personal experience and examining the full counsel of God leads to additional reflections, hopefully on some topics I have raised, particularly around matters related to the development of a missional theology and missional philosophy of ministry.

Could it be that the first order of business is to ask God for a heavy dose of humility, not to bless a new program? Could it be that we need to ask forgiveness for our pride and self-reliance on behalf of the American church, our convention, and American people before we espouse our church growth wisdom and methods? With that said, what are elements necessary for spiritual vitality? I am not sure, but for starters consider...

Activity of Holy Spirit, Exemplary/Pacesetting Leaders Following After Christ, Clear Bottom-line Doctrine and Values, Missional Focus, Atmosphere Conducive for Spiritual Growth (Good Relational Patterns + Supportive Flexible Organizational Structure + Freedom to Fail + Time)

I think they can be found in Antioch.

Traditional Church Model

