

Why Churches Decline

Introduction

- A. It wasn't long after moving to the Chicago area that I was invited to conduct a gospel meeting for one of the older churches in the area. It was a memorable experience for me.
 - 1. This group met in a large building; it would accommodate 250 people. Over the course of the week some of the members shared with me that in past years they had filled the building. But that week, only about twenty people gathered each night.
 - 2. The building had a large wing for Bible classes, but the classes were unused – little more than dusty storage closets now.
 - 3. Over the years this congregation experienced a terrible decline. All that was left was a handful of people struggling to keep the doors open.

- B. While this story is sad, it is hardly unusual.
 - 1. When Max and I visit other churches to conduct gospel meetings, it is a rare surprise to find a church that is growing and thriving. Some are just holding their own, at least for the moment. But many are declining. Look back over the last few decades and their numbers have been slowly but surely diminishing.
 - 2. I should add that this isn't just something Max and I sense from our small sampling of churches each year. Those who study church growth among our brethren tell us that this reflects what is happening across the country (Bobby Ross, Jr., *Church in America Marked by decline*, The Christian Chronicle, January 22, 2009).

- C. Why does this happen? How is it that over the course of 20-30 years a church can go from being a thriving group to one that is about to die?
 - 1. I guess it is no secret why that question interests me. I think Dowlen Road is a congregation that is thriving and growing. And yet, let us not be naïve and believe that what has happened in other places cannot happen here. It can!
 - 2. What we need to do is be smart about this problem. We need to examine what is happening in other places, identify what causes churches to decline and work together to make sure that we don't make those mistakes here. Rather than repeating the mistakes of others, we need to learn from them and take courageous steps to avoid them.
 - 3. Since this congregation began more than 60 years ago, it has been a group marked by steady growth and progress through the years.
 - 4. Let's make sure that this does not change on our watch; that we do not allow our group to take the dreadful turn to the path of decline.

- D. Which brings us to the questions I want us to ponder this morning: Why do churches decline? What can we do to avoid those same mistakes?

Reason [1] *They do not teach the lost.*

- A. There is a hard reality here with which we cannot quibble.
 - 1. If we are not busy inviting people, having Bible studies and baptizing the lost into Christ, then we will eventually begin to decline.
 - 2. Some churches can avoid facing this reality for a while.
 - a. A congregation may find itself in a part of the country that is economically prosperous.
 - 1) This brings Christians from other areas to their community for work. As a result, their numbers begin to swell.
 - 2) These numbers may include young families with children who fill up the Bible classes and encourage lots of activity in this aspect of the congregation's work.
 - 3) The worship may be lively and passionate, all lending to the impression that the congregation is thriving.
 - b. But all the while, the primary mission is being neglected, a mission that was announced as part of the plan all the way back in the Old Testament prophets (**Isaiah 12:4-5, Mark 16:15; Acts 8:4**).
 - c. Eventually this neglect catches up with churches. The economic situation changes and members are forced to move to other parts of the country. As the numbers drop, the congregation begins to decline. Churches that live by the economy eventually die by the economy.
 - 3. Don't miss my point – it's a great blessing to have disciples from other places move here and join our work.
 - a. Let's just appreciate that this is not adding to the kingdom; it's just shifting sheep around. True kingdom growth takes place when the gospel is preached and lost souls are saved (**Acts 2:47; 4:4**).
 - b. This kind of growth is the lifeblood of a church.
 - 1) When we are reaching the lost in our community, it does not matter what happens to the economy. The church continues to thrive.
 - 2) But when we fail in our mission, it is only a matter of time before the decline will begin.

- B. What lesson should we learn from this mistake that other churches make?
 - 1. Simply this, we must continually stir an evangelistic spirit in this place. To be specific, we need to be talking about it.
 - a. A month of Sundays should not go by without some encouragement about this work.
 - b. We need to have Bible classes that serve to equip us with the knowledge and skill we need to talk with others about Jesus.
 - c. We need to have special sessions to encourage us about this work.
 - 2. We must each feel a personal responsibility to make this happen. Ultimately, the work of reaching the lost is primarily an individual work.
 - 3. If we are to be an evangelistic church, each of us must take up this mission daily.
 - a. I need to be talking openly about my faith.
 - b. I need to invite others to come and visit.
 - c. I need to have Bible studies with my friends.
 - d. I need to do this work!
 - 4. We must remain focused on our mission and not allow ourselves to become distracted or complacent. If we do, we will die.

Reason [2] *They lose their children.*

- A. I've heard this problem referenced repeatedly in declining churches.
1. In groups now largely made up of older people, someone will say, "If we just had half of the young people that grew up in this congregation, this place would be full."
 2. What happened to those kids? It is likely that some went away to school and then found work in some other places. But that does not explain all the missing kids. Many have simply fallen away, about 60% of them in the average church. Factor in those who do leave for school or work and it is not hard to figure out why churches begin to decline. They are losing their youth.
 3. This is not meant to diminish the value of older disciples. Churches are blessed by the wisdom and stability of seasoned servants. But we also understand that we are not going to be here forever. One thing that gives a church stability is the presence of dedicated families who serve God generation after generation. We have families here who have been serving in this place for three generations. It's one of the things that has helped this church to thrive. But when that is missing – when churches start losing 60-70% of their young people on top of the ones who move away – it dramatically accelerates decline.
- B. So what are we to learn from all of this? We need to make sure that we take care of our kids. Let me be specific about that.
1. Making sure that we are addressing their spiritual needs must be among our most important priorities.
 - a. We need rock-solid Bible classes that teach truth and instill strong convictions (II Timothy 3:14-15).
 - b. We need to help our kids discover how they can serve in the kingdom and develop their talents (I Peter 4:10).
 - c. These things we do with our kids – the devotions, teen weekends, training classes, Bible studies, 5:30 devotions – all have benefits that extend beyond the blessings they give to our kids. This is work that impacts our future as a congregation.
 2. But let's also remember that, while we can do some things as a church to help our kids, this battle is really going to be won at home.
 - a. Moms and dads need to take this warning personally. It's our job to raise our kids to know God and to instill His words on their hearts (**Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4**).
 - b. We need to do this because nothing is more important than our kids going to heaven.
 - c. But their continued faithfulness will also have a tremendous impact on the future of this church.
 3. We need to make sure that we don't lose our kids. When we do, everyone loses.

Reason [3] *They fight and divide.*

- A. It is a common thread that connects many declining churches. They have problems getting along with each other.
1. The sad thing is that often the controversies are over issues of judgment that have no real consequence. This kind of meaningless squabbling often leaves people bitter and hostile which hampers our ability to work together. It leaves others discouraged and cynical. Churches simply cannot thrive in this setting.
 2. But it gets worse. Sometimes the bickering eventually leads to division. This dramatically accelerates the process of decline. Paul warned us about this (**Galatians 5:13-15**).
 3. This kind of senseless squabbling is evil.
 - a. It is contrary to the love God says that we are to have for each other (John 13:34-35).
 - b. It works against the unity Jesus desires for us (John 17:20-21).
 - c. It impedes (and often completely stops) the primary mission of God's people (Matthew 28:18-20).
 4. Let us be warned: people will answer to God for this kind of evil conduct!
- B. What should we learn from all of this?
1. First, let's recognize that we cannot thrive in acrimony. The decision to engage in petty fussing with each other is a decision to begin the process of decline. We need to see it in just that way.
 2. Second, we need to work really hard to get along (**Ephesians 4:1-3**).
 - a. I need to accept that in a church this size all kind of judgment decisions have to be made; that people will have different judgments; and as a result I cannot always have my way...AND THAT'S OKAY!
 - b. I need to be committed to unity. When problems arise, I'm not going to run away, I'm going to work it out with my brethren.
 - c. I need to develop more fully the qualities that make unity possible – patience, humility, gentleness, love.
 3. There will be times when we must battle over issues of truth and error. Because that is true, let's be sure that we do not waste our energy and allow ourselves to be distracted by petty things.
 4. One reason this congregation has been able to thrive over the years is because we have worked through our problems and avoided division.
 5. Let's make sure that this continues to be true on our watch.

Conclusion: It matters...

Keep in mind that when we talk about churches declining, we are talking about something profoundly important. We are talking about our effectiveness in doing the most important work on the face of the earth – helping people get to heaven. This is what it's all about! More than anything else, we should desire to be effective at this. There simply isn't anything more important than going to heaven. Are you going there?

- David A. Banning