

Is It Ever God's Will For A Church To Plateau Or To Decline?

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Through the years, numerous preachers have had an impact on my life and ministry. One who has had a lasting impact is Dr. Vance Havner. Dr. Havner's style was to preach the Word with a series of "one line zingers." In 1954, Southern Baptists adopted a Sunday School enrollment campaign: A Million More in '54. Dr. Havner, in his dry and piercing manner, said, "God help us. If we get a million more like we've got, we're sunk!" Well, since 1954, Southern Baptists have grown (at least on paper) by eight million. Therefore, Dr. Havner's concerns are greater today than ever! We Southern Baptists boast of about 16.3 million members. Yet about 5 million are reported as non-resident members. On an average Sunday, we have about 6 million in attendance (and that's worship attendance, which is easily exaggerated). We have about 4 million in Sunday School each week. Of that number, perhaps no more than 3 million are truly regenerate! That is, they show lasting fruit that is essential evidence of true believers (Matthew 7:20). Evangelist Jay Strack shared at a recent meeting that George Barna's research shows that 88% of our students stop attending church when they graduate from high school. Researcher George Barna also notes that there are at least as many divorces within Southern Baptist churches as in the unchurched culture! This brings me to the issue of declining or plateaued churches. Many pastors who believe that these facts are dishonoring to the Lord and are a disservice to the bride of Christ are beginning to address these concerns by making some much needed changes - a move I loudly applaud! These changes are likely to result in a season of decline or at least a plateau. Sometimes a season of decline or plateau is God's will so that ultimately true growth may occur. Let me list some biblical reasons why a season of decline or plateau may be God's will:

1. A Return to Biblical Preaching

When a God-called pastor accepts a church that has had man-centered and shallow preaching, he may offend some and see some leave as he proclaims and teaches the truth of God. Paul warned Timothy to expect this (II Timothy 4:3-4). The Old Testament prophets didn't always draw big crowds. Jesus said the people often killed them (Matthew 23:29-31, 37). The closer Jesus got to the Cross and the more truth He unveiled in His preaching, the smaller His crowds became (John 6:66). Paul experienced a dwindling of co-workers and some decline in popularity (II Timothy 4:10, 16). Pastors should be wise, humble, and prayerful in their preaching. Mean-spirited preaching from a dictatorial pastor is not true Bible preaching. However, preaching the Word verse-by-verse and fearing only God may result in a decline in attendance before growth comes!

2. A Return to More Meaningful Membership

One of my mentors used to say that if a chimpanzee could be trained to walk down the aisle and take the pastor's hand, Southern Baptists would take him as a member! This is a humorous illustration, but it is not far from the truth. My experience of twenty-five years at First Baptist Church of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, has led me to believe that far too many Baptists join a local church as just another form of family recreation. Many churches are not separated from the world with an uncompromising call to cross-bearing discipleship. Sadly, many look like "Six Flags Over Jesus." Bloated membership rolls testify to the fact that membership is not taken seriously. A pastor who leads a church to establish even minimum levels of accountability and discipline concerning membership is very likely to experience a decline or a plateau. At First Baptist, we now require a three-hour membership class and a covenant meeting with a church leader for prospective members. Before they are received into church membership, we ask them to make five affirmations of faithfulness and service before the church family. A few years ago a group left our church. Some honestly stated that, "The standards were just too high." However, they are not too high for Jesus and the clear teaching of Scripture (Matthew 16:24, 18:15-17; Hebrews 10:23-25).

3. A Season of Purifying

In studying Baptist history, one will find that biblical discipline was once common in our churches. I am convinced this is because they understood something that we don't understand: the purity of the church affects the power of the Gospel. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Dr. J.M. Pendleton states in his Baptist Church Manual that the church must strive to remain pure because the church is "the depository of the pure principles of the Gospel" (144). Several years ago, we began to purge our membership rolls and exercise compassionate discipline toward members who lived in open sin, yet refused to repent (I Corinthians 5; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15; Matthew 18:15-17). This will often lead to a season of decline or at least a plateau. The Old Testament gives prototypes of this. For example, God disciplined and purified Israel by removing Korah and those who rebelled with him (Numbers 16:1-35). He also removed the idolaters who worshipped the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-28). These and many more Old Testament examples show that God's will sometimes includes a season of decline! An incident in the book of Acts shows this is God's plan for the New Testament church. During Pentecost, a season of great growth, God shut everything down for a season to deal with sin. This is vividly clear in the way God dealt with the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. After God cleansed the church of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:13 says, ". . . none of the rest dared to associate with them . . ." The numbers went down and they plateaued, at least for a short season! Unfortunately, the biblical doctrine of compassionate discipline is all but lost in the modern church. Pastors should prayerfully and wisely move to restore this practice that was once common among us. However, even the most patient and wise procedures will still likely cause many to become upset and to leave the church for one that "is not so legalistic." Our experience has been that after an unrepentant member is removed, we often have a season of new growth! This happens only after the principle of biblical discipline is well established within the church. Too

often pastors are forcefully terminated over their desire to obey this clear, biblical teaching. God help us when the fear of man and the idolatry of "numbers" rules supreme!

4. A Return to a More Biblical Understanding of Conversion

After years of great growth at First Baptist, I became disheartened and discouraged over the number of new "converts" who bore no fruit or who completely quit coming within a year or two after baptism. We did a good job of follow-up through our Small Groups, but it seemed the great majority of converts who were previously unchurched fell away. For example, after one revival, we researched and found that a great percentage of the unchurched who came forward to be saved and were baptized, fell away within two years. Then God showed me the reason. I had a shallow understanding of conversion. I began to realize that getting a person to "walk to the front" or "pray a prayer," i.e., make a decision, didn't necessarily mean that he had been converted. I am deeply indebted to the leaders of the conservative "take back" of the Southern Baptist Convention. They repeatedly exhorted us to look to our forefathers and see what they believed. I took their advice. The first place I looked was at our early Confessions of Faith. The New Hampshire Confession of Faith of 1833 is the foundational confession for Southern Baptists. It is the Confession from which our 1925, 1963, and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message is taken. The New Hampshire Confession's thorough, biblical statement on repentance and faith convicted me. It states, "We believe that Repentance and Faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces, wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God; whereby being deeply convinced of our guilt, danger, and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God with unfeigned contrition, confession, and supplication for mercy; at the same time heartily receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King, and relying on him alone as the only and all-sufficient Saviour." Just to be honest, our counseling of baptismal candidates had been light on repentance. I also began to study our Baptist fathers - Pendleton, Dagg, Boyce, Spurgeon, and many others concerning their definition of conversion and what constituted good baptismal counseling. The more I read, the more I realized their practice was much different from mine. For example, Dr. J.L. Dagg in his Manual of Church Order states, "that we must look for more than a 'mere profession of words,' but make every effort to ascertain that the candidate both 'understands and feels what he professes'" (269). Furthermore, Dr. Pendleton, in his book Christian Doctrines, states that repentance involves five things: (1) a consciousness of personal sin, (2) an understanding that sin is a great evil committed against God, for which there is no excuse, (3) a hatred of sin, (4) a sorrow of sin, (5) a purpose to forsake sin (263-269). Therefore, we changed our counseling of baptismal candidates so that it is now more thorough and more biblical; we especially look for evidence of biblical repentance. This change was difficult for some, and we have lost some church members because of it. Some have felt that this was changing the Gospel, yet I'm convinced that it IS the Gospel and that it pleases and honors God. Let me make it clear that we must urge all men to repent and come to Christ. We still average 30% of our Sunday School attendance at weekly outreach Visitation. However, we endeavor to baptize only disciples (Matthew

28:18-20). A true convert (a disciple) will show good evidence of repentance and faith (Acts 20:21-22). A pragmatic spirit has taken over many churches. Instead of looking for biblical evidences of conversion, it seems we have adopted an "easy believism" or a "decisionism." In too many churches people come to Christ to add another layer of frosting to their lives, not to flee the wrath of God! Trying to correct this may cause some to become upset or even angry. A temporary decline or plateau may occur, but as Evangelist Junior Hill shared with me recently, "there can be nothing wrong with making sure the church membership is more regenerate." The true and clear words of Dr. Havner still echo with conviction down through the years, "God help us; if we get a million more like we've got, we're sunk!" Far more important should be the desire of the under-shepherd to hear at the end of his ministry the words of the Chief Shepherd, "well done good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). We must maintain a passion for soul winning and missions! However, the faithful under-shepherd may experience what the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the apostles experienced, some seasons of decline or plateau. After all, the goal of the church is the glory of God (Ephesians 3:21; Ephesians 1:5-6, 11-14), not just ever-increasing numbers. Is God glorified through numerical growth? YES! -- but not always.