

Reeder, Harry L., III., with David Swavely. *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*. Rev. and exp. ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008. 234 pp. Paperback.

With most of the churches in North America in plateau or decline, this book is a timely book written by the veteran pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL. *From Embers to a Flame* offers guidance from a shepherd whose ministry reflects his effectiveness as a revitalizing leader.

Paul's writings to Timothy serve as the primary biblical basis for Reeder's revitalization strategy, summarized simply as *remember* the past, *repent* from sin, and *recover* the first things. The first "things" begin with the gospel and include grace, prayer, and the Word. The church that longs for revitalization is amazed by grace, commits itself to prayer, and preaches the good news of salvation.

The strengths of this book are numerous. First, Reeder rightly emphasizes the significance of church leaders, while also understanding that God alone revitalizes the church. Preachers will be especially challenged by his description of the "man preaching" based on 2 Timothy 4:1-5. Leaders are to educate believers, embody gospel truth, empower others to serve, and evaluate the work of leaders trained. Moreover, revitalization demands that pastoral leaders model repentance by turning from their own sin.

Second, Reeder emphasizes the task of evangelism, even challenging those churches that focus on growing deeper in reaction to the "superficiality of the day" (30). Noting that churches that are "a mile wide and an inch deep" are problematic, he also takes issue with churches that are "a mile deep and an inch wide" at the expense of evangelizing the lost. True believers will seek the lost, says Reeder, but evangelism must still be intentional. In fact, his description of intentional evangelistic approaches is one of the strongest components of this work.

Third, this book is principle driven, but it does not ignore the practical. Indeed, this work is at times surprisingly practical given Reeder's occasional criticisms of pragmatic church growth. His focus on church health echoes Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church* concept. His calls for mission statements, vision statements, and numerical goals are commonly found in other writings. The interested pastor will also find here ideas for celebrating a church's history, suggestions for a leadership development curriculum, a list of leadership principles and practices, and guidelines for starting a small group discipleship ministry. Regrettably, only brief attention is given to the necessity and practice of church discipline – a most important topic in church revitalization.

Additionally, Reeder's interest in military history and sports is evident in illustrations throughout this work. These illustrations not only will appeal to men, but they also subtly remind the reader that church revitalization is not easy; revitalization will not occur without spiritual warfare and struggle. On the other hand, Reeder writes, "you and Jesus Christ make an invincible team, and evil can never win as long as He is with you" (p. 81).

This book is not, however, without weaknesses. The repetitive use of alliteration reveals the author as first a preacher, but its usage is at times overdone. Statistics and illustrations are sometimes outdated, as is often the case in a revision. An appendix, "Revisiting the Prayer of Jabez," is a balanced discussion of this popular prayer, but its connection to the remainder of the book is a bit forced.

Nevertheless, this book is a worthy read for any church leader who longs for church revitalization. I will utilize it as a supplemental text in future evangelism and church growth classes.