

The State of the Church

Ephesians 4:1-3, 11-16

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Wesley J. Gabel

I've never done a *State of the Church* message. In the Bible, I found seven *State of the Church* messages that Jesus gave through the Apostle John. We find them in Revelation 2 and 3, and surprise, each is dramatically shorter than mine! The Holy Spirit talks through the Apostle Paul nine times to seven different churches. To one, the Roman church, Paul simply introduces himself. To the Corinthian church, he one-time addresses problem with immorality and church division. A second time he addresses their challenge of his authority. He completes that letter with this challenge for the church:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. (2 Corinthians 13:5, NIV)

Paul called the Corinthians to check their health as a church. He was not writing to them as individuals. He was addressing them as a people.

We must recognize that there is something such as corporate health. Parts of a body can be healthy while other parts suffer disease or harm. If we do not address the pain, eventually the entire body will suffer. The body may be crippled by the disease, or it may be crippled by the way it compensates for the disease. Either way the body will not function properly if it does not address the concern. It also is important that we do not ignore good health in the body. It is important to not exaggerate ill health, or give it improper focus. When I was an Emergency Medical Technician on an ambulance crew and attended injured and sick people, we measured our words so that we would not unnecessarily alarm the people we worked with. We never said: "Wow, you look a mess," "the doctor is going to have big trouble with you," "you probably

won't make it," or "have you ever thought about living with one arm?" Some times the way we talk about things create obstacles in people's mind so that their health actually deteriorates when we are trying to do them good. That happens with churches. We focus on pain while we are still doing amazing things and acting in a truly godly way. We become negative, pessimistic and demoralized where our perception becomes the major problem. It is important not to surrender our grasp of what is healthy while we look at what is not healthy. It can also be very difficult to divide opinion from fact. In this message, I'll try to do that; but I have to share opinion and God's word also.

Before I leave this point, I want us to learn something more from what the Holy Spirit did through Paul as he addressed the state of five other churches besides Corinth. With the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians, the Holy Spirit both exposed concerns and offered encouragement. Specifically, whether we are oppressed from inside or outside our church family, we must remember that (1) we are family by God's design. We just can't get away from one another cleanly and quickly. Even when we transfer to other churches, we still together carry the name of Christ as one family, and our attitude toward one another either grieves the Holy Spirit and quenches his work wherever we go, or it gives Jesus honor. Therefore, with humility, gentleness, patience and love, we must do everything to preserve the unity of the Spirit. We must also remember that (2) the Holy Spirit provides us with leadership who have specific gifts that equip us to serve one another. No leader is perfect or makes perfect decisions. God's design is to give leaders various gifts to equip us as servants of one another who build each other in love. As we build one another up, we are to speak the truth in love so that we don't walk hand-in-hand into sin and harm. It would do no good for a group of alcoholics to support one another in their drinking, and it does no good for a group of saints to

enable one another to sin or perpetuate hurt. We're here to help one another in love, and that means we cannot ignore problems or sinful attitudes. At the same time, we must approach all things with patience, sincere love and faith in our Lord's work among us. We are not judges. We are witnesses who must utterly depend on the counsel of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, the first call of Bethany is to seek, receive and trust the counsel of God. That means prayer! Jesus called the Jerusalem temple a house of prayer. He spent inordinate amounts of time praying... sometimes all night long. Jesus' first disciples became a people devoted to prayer. They relied on the counsel of Scripture and what they learned as they prayed. That is what made their teaching, preaching and acts of charity so powerful. In my experience, I've never been associated with a congregation that has grown more in prayer ministry than Bethany. Our prayer chain is the most active I have ever witnessed. People from our congregation are gathering at all times and places for prayer. At any moment you might see people praying in the sanctuary, the hallway, their homes, the restaurant, their workplace. God is just moving among us. Every child, youth and adult in this congregation are covered every day in prayer. There are teams covering every worship service in prayer. At every worship service, teams minister to individuals in prayer. I've witnessed more physical, emotional and spiritual healing in the past six years at Bethany than in my previous 19 years of parish work, and I witnessed some amazing things then. Many leaders and members of this congregation are praying for their neighbors and workplaces. They walk their neighborhoods, they walk their workplaces and seek God's blessing. Our prayer ministry alone fuels me with such optimism and anticipation of our coming days together. It also brings me great comfort that we will find wisdom for the challenges we face. How can we not grow when we emulate Jesus in the most fundamental area of his life?

As of late, Bethany has been both a force for Christian unity in our community and a catalyst in spiritual transformation. One fruit from our work with other congregations is that on June 10th some 1600 people from 16 local congregations tackled 53 projects that not merely altered the face of schools and parks, but also warmed the hearts of many in our community. We continue to help congregations work together to spiritually renew our community.

Since coming to Bethany, I've witnessed creative and sensitive ministry to children that congregations three times our size would have difficulty reproducing. In its early years, half of Bethany's worshipping congregation was under 12 years of age. Although we do not enjoy that ratio now, God certainly has put children in our hearts and creativity for children in our hands.

I've picked out only three ways that we have excelled as a congregation. There are other important things we do and have done that must both please our heavenly Father and be authored by Jesus. We are really blessed; and sometimes, when we focus on the challenges, we can't see the blessing. We need to give God thanks and realize He is working marvelously among us.

Nevertheless, we also face some difficult challenges. In the past six years, we've made changes intended to help us fulfill our mission to *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ*. In faith we changed our Sunday morning schedule and added a distinctly different style worship service. We then grew in worship and Sunday School through May of 2004; but then came a drop so sudden and precipitous that the average annual attendance declined in 2004, 2005 and so far in 2006. With less in attendance finances have become difficult. In faith we streamlined our decision-making process to engage more of our church family in ministry to people than in administration of tasks. An unintended result is that some people have been hurt and feel left out of decisions that impact their lives. With an eye to expansion, we've shifted from weekend to mid-week family ministry to add offerings for children, youth and adults.

Again changes sometimes require painful adjustments, and though we have reached new people with these changes, some of our family has been impacted negatively. Some of our family feels marginalized. For a people who are called to express Jesus' love for one another and embody Jesus' in his mission "to seek and to save what was lost," these are not acceptable outcomes for our efforts; and they cannot be long endured.

Together the changes have made us reflect more the diversity that exists within Jesus' family; and that diversity both prepares us to reach many more people and also requires much more communication, patience and understanding than when we all worship and express our faith in Christ similarly. None of this catches the God who loves us and the God who leads us by surprise. Indeed, he intends us to build one another up in love; and he is sticking with his plan!

So here's our challenge. *First, recognize that God works in our challenges to perfect us.* God is not on vacation. God doesn't say, "You've got to be really smart and make no errors for me to bless you." We will build one another in love because Christ is welcome here. So believe that, and act on it. *Second, pray for Bethany.* Select one day this week to fast (appropriate to your health and circumstance) on behalf of your church. Ask God to give us wisdom. In James 1:5-8 the Bible tells us that God won't find fault with us when we ask, but will give us the wisdom we desire. We just need to trust him. The wisdom will come. *Third, join us for lunch today.* We will share some very interesting things that you'll want to hear. You'll know better some of our issues, activities and plans; and you'll have opportunity to say some things that we need to hear. *Finally, give thanks.* In God's love and wisdom, he has brought us together for this time. All of us are gifts to one another from God. You may think, "God, would you bless some other part of my family with this brother?" (Send him to another church!), but God is faithful in his love for you and me; and God will show his strength in our weakness. Praise God!