

# THE STATE OF THE CHURCH

Selected Biblical Texts

Written By

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**W**hat does it take to have a really nice lawn and surrounding garden area? A professional gardener? No. It takes knowledge and study, analysis and evaluation, and commitment and application. (You might want to throw in a little prayer too, especially in the harsh, humid, and unpredictable environment of northern Virginia.) By knowledge and study, I mean you must learn something about subject, which means you must read a few books about it, talk to some knowledgeable people, and maybe watch some helpful videos. By analysis and evaluation, I mean you must take the time to look at your turf or your garden area and pay attention to what is growing there which shouldn't be there. You must consider if the turf isn't as green it should be, so you can take appropriate steps to make it greener, after all, isn't it about having a really deep green yard, as opposed to a yellow one? By commitment and application, I'm speaking about actually doing something based on what you know and analyze. Sorry, the whole mow, blow, and go concept will not help you build something really beautiful.

So, let's say, for sake of argument, you can't stand crabgrass in your lawn. Well, with a little study you'll discover that the time to start keeping it out of your lawn is in late March . . . which means you have basically two months to think about what I'm going to say. All those crabgrass seeds are now lying dormant in your turf. To keep them at bay you need to purchase some *Dimension* pre-emergence and apply it to your lawn. This will keep those seeds from ever germinating in the first place. Also, keep a bottle of crabgrass spray, like *Image Crabgrass Killer*, mixed so you can kill what does germinate. Note: don't think you can seed over this area after you put the *Dimension* down because the product will keep your seed from germinating, which is another issue. Plant the grass seed first and let it germinate, and, then, put down the *Dimension*.

Do you have wild violets in your yard? Believe me, they are invasive and prolific little plants. How do you get rid of them? Purchase some *Turflon Ester*. Not only will it kill them, but it will take out a whole host of other really nasty and unsightly weeds. Note to self: you can't know if you have violets until you can first identify what one looks like. It's just simple logic.

If you want to keep grubs from eating your nice, green turf, then March through April is the time to address them with an application of *Merit*. You will be glad you applied this product when your lawn kicks into gear.

If you want to get the most out of your sprays, then add some *Wilt Pruf* to your mix. Two ounces per gallon of herbicide will cause the spray to evenly coat the leaves in question to assure a good kill. The product will also keep the rain from washing away your spray. If you apply the product on plants which might be susceptible to the harsh rays of the sun, it will act like a sun tan lotion and make them more drought resistance I always have a bottle of this stuff around.

Now, what has all of this got to do with the annual State of the Church address, which is required by our Constitution? Everything. Just as a beautiful lawn doesn't just happen, neither does a growing, maturing, flourishing church. It also takes knowledge and study, analysis and evaluation, and commitment and application, coupled, of course, with prayer and a reliance on God to bless the work of your hands. So, with this metaphor in mind, I think today I'll assume the role of a spiritual Gardener. And God does like gardening. The fact He placed man in a garden is a case in point. Further evidence is found in passages like Isaiah 5, where He built a vineyard called Israel. Jesus also tapped into the gardening motif in the vines and branches metaphor in John 15.

With this gardener/garden motif in mind, I, then have a logical question:

## How's Our Spiritual Lawn And Garden Looking?

While no spiritual lawn we call a local church is perfect, I am partial to this one. From my perspective it looks like this. Sure, there are always issues we need to address, new ministries we need to launch, and old ministries we need to streamline and enhance; however, for the most part our lawn in garden is flourishing by means of our collective efforts combined with the movement of the Spirit of God. This broad analysis leads me to posit a question we need to answer.

## What's Working Well To Grow This Garden?

For one, we are consistently fulfilling the biblical ideal of a healthy, maturing local church. I know this to be true because I'm quite familiar with that model as laid out in Acts 2. After Christ's Spirit filled the Church at Pentecost, the young, fledgling seeds of the church began to germinate and grow around a particular model. Dr. Luke discloses this model in Acts 2:42-47.

<sup>42</sup> And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

<sup>44</sup> And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> and they *began* selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, <sup>47</sup> praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

Charles Swindoll helpfully introduces an acronym to help us wrap our gardening minds around these concepts which help grow a great church. His acronym is one monosyllabic word: W.I.F.E.

The **W** stands for worship (v. 43). You'll note how the ancient church had a sense of awe when they gathered together. As they worshipped the living Christ, as they listened to the apostles teach, they saw lives changed, and they couldn't help but sense God's presence. Haven't you sensed God in our worship? I have. Haven't you had the Holy Spirit tap you on the shoulder and say, "Hey, I think the pastor is talking to you about the subject in question." Our worship team is, also, not about entertainment but about leading you into God's holy presence. There is a difference you know. It's a concept we understand as adults, and our teens get it too because they have their own times of rich, meaningful worship prior to study time. I'm sure God is honored.

Many are consistently being obedient to be in corporate worship per God's command (Heb. 10:24), and I know they are benefitting from it. How about you? Make 2019 the year you started getting consistent. Do it and watch God grow you as you come in contact with Him.

The **I** stands for instruction (v. 42). We are under biblical command to preach and teach the Word of God . . . all of it from Genesis to Revelation. Ostensibly, this means we will not skip over tough texts, avoid complex cultural questions, side-step thorny questions, or divorce biblical verses from their contexts to craft topical sermons and lessons. No. We are known as a church which preaches and teaches the Bible with a view of equipping people to live by its life-changing truths. This commitment is readily apparent whether you are in a Men's Bible study, or a Life Group study in someone's home. We firmly believe the Bible has the answers to life, and that life is best lived by its timeless truths. Hence, we are not here to entertain, but to educate so you can know God and understand how to live for Him in a godless environment. Many are engaged in the variety of instructional opportunities made available by this church, and you have grown spiritually because of it, I'm convinced. For those who are yet tied into study, it is time to redeem the time for so much is at stake.

The **F** stands for fellowship (v. 42, 44-46). This is the Greek word *koinonia*, and here is how Danker defines it:

[DANK] **κοινωνία**

**κοινωνία, ας, ἡ** [κοινωνός] – 1. 'close association in shared interest' or 'shared community life', **fellowship** Ac 2:42; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 13:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 1 J 1:3, 6f. – 2. 'practical expression of fellowship through sharing', **fellowshipping concern** Ro 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Phlm 6; Hb 13:16. – 3. 'close connection' (with), w. focus on sacred things 1 Cor 10:16; 2 Cor 6:14; Phil 3:10.

A Bible-teaching church lacking fellowship/koinonia is like a lawn with an acidic soil issue. It's not very appealing and needs to have its spiritual PH value put into proper balance. Our church has that Bible-teaching-fellowship/koinonia balance. I see it all the time, and I hear about as you tell me stories. What you hear in your theological instruction you typically employ in your life by sacrificially stepping out and meeting real life needs. Last week, some of our men got together to build a small wooden platform for a homeless man's tent to rest on to keep him warm. They did this because his other tent structure burned to the ground. That's koinonia. When a group of ladies from our care team drop by to visit and pray with a wife whose husband has terminal cancer, this is koinonia. When people give sacrificially over and above their normal tithes to God in order to help fund the new worship center, this is koinonia. When two people get together at a Starbucks to talk and pray, this is koinonia.

Koinonia is all about you paying attention to the needs around you and then stepping up to the plate and meeting those needs. While our Christless culture does need to hear the truths from the Scriptures, that message is most powerful when said culture sees authentic and selfless

love evident in the lives of the church. We are, therefore, flourishing partly because there is a fine balance between teaching and biblical fellowship. And you see it all around the church from the youth ministry to the women's and children's ministry. This beauty, of course, serves as an attractant in our selfish, narcissistic world.

The **E** stands for, you guessed it, evangelism (v. 47). What is evangelism?

George Peter's defines it well when he states,

It is the authoritative proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible in relevant and intelligible terms, in a persuasive manner with the definite purpose of making Christian converts. It is a presentation-penetration-permeation-confrontation that not only elicits but demands a decision. It is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ for a verdict.<sup>1</sup>

This is exactly what the NT Church did so well. Once these Jews were convinced that Christ was, in fact, the risen Messiah and Savior, they couldn't wait to tell the whole world, and they didn't wait. The result was tremendous: their home churches grew leaps and bounds as God gave them a rich harvest.

Thom Rainer, a nationally known church growth consultant, tells us from his broad experience that healthy churches have at least twenty-six conversions per year.<sup>2</sup> Last year we had forty-nine. That's the sign of a spiritual lawn which is doing well, so I commend you for sharing your faith and then being courageous and caring enough to close the deal, as it were, by actually asking the person in question if they desired to become part of God's eternal family by professing Jesus as their Savior and Lord.



So, corporately, we are doing well with evangelism. Whether it's a child involved in our thriving children's program under Tammy Hassett's leadership with her team, or a teen under the ministries of Grant Todd or Jeremiah Nichols, one thing is certain: They are going to hear about the gospel of Jesus and be asked to embrace this risen Savior by faith. Also, I've concluded, more frequently this year than prior years, a number of sermons in Romans with altar calls. Why? We understand how important it is to move from teaching the lost to challenging the lost to make a decision concerning Christ. We'll do more of this in the future.

Privately, many of you are fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), by sharing the story of Christ's person and work on the cross for us. God is blessing all of this, and for that we give him praise . . . but there is so much more work to do as our country slips into spiritual and moral darkness. We will be faithful, I know, in 2019 to make sure we do our part in shining the light of the gospel into that darkness.

One of our creative and impassioned parishioners even started his own comic book publishing company this year. It's called *Cave Pictures Publishing*, based on Plato's Allegory of the Cave, "in which a man who initially only sees reality cast in ill-defined shadows on a cave wall is

<sup>1</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights From The Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 23.

freed and moves upward and onward toward the source of all goodness and truth.” The culturally relevant stories are illustrated by top-drawer professional artists, and each one is designed to creatively guide a non-Christian toward thinking about Christian truths so that, eventually, they can grasp and understand the gospel meta-story, the story that trumps all other redemptive stories. If you’d like to read more about this, you can certainly check out their web site: <https://cavepicturespublishing.com>. Take note: these are Christians coming in under the radar of the unbelieving world in a fashion which won’t make the non-believer run from the gospel and spiritual truths. So learn from how they go about fishing in this particular pond by analyzing their storylines and graphics.

Pragmatically, I must ask the question: What are you creatively doing to bring the gospel of Christ to the world where the Lord has you? When is the last time you shared your faith? When is the last time you actually asked someone to turn to Him right then and there? Many in our church are going this out of love and obedience to Jesus. May you join this this year.

So, let’s recap our turf talk: how are we doing? I think, by and large, we are doing great. Our fulfillment of the W.I.F.E. acronym shows that much, and it’s an acronym we all really know by three other terms: Gather, Grow, and Go. Right now we are gathering, and I trust that what you are hearing will help you grow in your relationship with Christ. Finally, it is my prayer that even this State of Church address will empower and motivate you to go with the gospel with even more zeal in this new year.

A second question naturally flows from the first one

## Where Is Work Needed To Grow This Garden?

I think we can easily divide our analysis into two distinct areas: the practical and the visionary. Of course, in a church of this size there are many areas we can consider, but for sake of time I will limit my observations to just these two zones of our growing and complex ministry.

*The Practical.* Under this area, three items are of utmost importance.

- *One, the building.* As you already know and have experienced, this has been the wettest winter in Northern, Virginia history. The old record was set in 1899 at 61.33 inches. The new record is now 61.34 inches and the rain keeps coming even into the new year. This reality has been beneficial to the flora and fauna of the area, but it has wreaked havoc, did I say HAVOC, on our building program. It has cost us over sixty, count ‘em, days of work. This reality, of course, has caused a chain-reaction in a variety of inner-connected areas. It has also made the dirt we were holding from our basement excavation useless because it is so wet. Just this Thursday we had to start paying an unexpected cost for having our dirt replaced with a different kind of dirt which can be used to finish off the soil compaction around the facility. If we didn’t do this, we would have had to wait for our dirt to dry out, which wouldn’t have occurred until March or April . . . or beyond. Pragmatically, that would have meant our whole project would have just sat idle. The elders wisely, I think, voted to spend monies to keep the project moving forward so we can keep other costs down.

I give you one situation to just remind you how complex and costly it is to build a structure of this size. So far, we are closing in on having \$11 million cash for our down payment, and this is simply jaw-dropping to witness. God has moved among our body in a profound fashion, and for that I am humbled and grateful. Yet, with new costs arising because of the record rain, to name a few reasons, I challenge

you to prayerfully consider how God might have you give toward this worthy endeavor. Perhaps it will be your first time to give because you are new, and that is great. Perhaps you are an old-timer who desires to do more. That's great too. I just ask you to make the financing of this project an item of continued prayer in 2019.

In addition, soon the construction team will be cutting into our foyer which is sealed off near the coffee bar. They will demo this area to prepare it to be tied into the new building. I'm sure with the walls down during the winter this will make the temps in our existing foyer artic-like. You might want to dress warmer when this occurs. I'm sure the early church put up with greater issues.

Also, in the fall we will be losing several feet of our existing stage in order to prepare the room for a new youth stage and basketball court. I know everything looks great now, but in the future it's going to get a little rugged. We will also at that time lose some of our children's classrooms as they demo them for individual bathrooms. Our children's and youth ministries are already working about how to keep our large ministry in these areas functional when this occurs. As we head into these waters, it would probably be good to pray that God would give us all a heavy dose of patience and unconditional love.

I know it is still a ways off, but in January of next year we'll lose the 127 seats of our current balcony as it is flattened and prepped for a new youth hang out area. I do think this should impact us in the here and now. Losing that many seats will be tough, but I believe it challenges many of you to start thinking NOW about attending the early service. This is/will be God's will for you then, so why now enjoy that divine will now?

Finally, in order to facilitate cars exiting our property between the services, we will be placing orange cones down the middle of the main entrance road. The left side of the cones will be strictly for those desiring to make a left turn, while the right will be for those committed to a right turn. Please, don't think it is godly to pull into the left lane and then wait for the Spirit to open traffic up so you can hang a right turn. This type of freedom in Christ might move other saints behind you to find that their faith is being tested almost beyond measure. ☺

Thinking about the construction upheaval which lies ahead, I can't help but think of Paul's counsel to the Ephesians:

<sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup> And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Eph. 4).

Sounds like this would be a good verse to commit to memory, or to, at least, have it printed in bold letters, laminated and placed on your dashboard as you pull into the church parking lot on a given Sunday.

- *Two, Service Opportunities.* Since we typically lose around 20% of our membership per year because of government and military moves, and since we also typically receive that many new people who move to this area, I must unabashedly challenge our new people to get plugged in . . . sooner rather than later.

Pick an area: nursery, children's teacher, children's teacher, parking lot team, shuttle driver, safety team personnel, high school small table leader, junior high small table leader, women's ministry set up for Tuesday mornings, men's cooking team for their month breakfast, playing an instrument on the worship team, singing on the worship team, being part of our tech team, and so on and so forth. There are countless areas where you can and should be used of God. The question is, Will you step forward, like Isaiah did in his day (Isa. 6), and say, "Lord, here I am, send me?" Will you say, Lord, here I am use me? It takes, on average, 240 volunteers to run our effective and creative children's program on Sunday mornings. Surely, there is place for you somewhere on this burgeoning team.

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul reminds us that at the moment of conversion, Jesus not only forgave our sin, but he measured out spiritual gifts to each of us to be used to benefit the body of Christ.

<sup>7</sup> But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. (Eph. 4).

Since this is true, it leads to this gardening observation: *the quality of our turf is utterly dependent upon you using that gift or gift among us.*

At the end of the day, what is God looking for? Paul answers this query this way in his letter to the Corinthians:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. <sup>2</sup> In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. <sup>3</sup> But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by *any* human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. <sup>4</sup> For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. <sup>5</sup> Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men's* hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God (1 Cor. 4).

Unfortunately, the Corinthians were tough on Paul's leadership. Many trouble-makers made sure they cast him in a negative light in order to elevate themselves. Sounds like the political climate of D.C., doesn't it? Despite the personal attacks Paul gives some sagacious advice in verse 2. When all is said and done, when you stand before the throne of God Almighty, He will just want to know one thing: Were you faithful to me? Well, are you? Will you be even more faithful in 2019? The growth and proper functioning of our church depends on how you answer that question. I'll be praying for how you will answer, and will be expectant to see God move mightily in your life.

- *Three, Our Marriages.* While we have many strong, stable, godly ones, we also, to be totally authentic and transparent, have many which are weak, unstable, and ungodly. I'd dare say this is the main thing your pastor's address in counseling our body. Last year of the 1,200 hours spent in counseling, the majority of it was given

to 60 couples who desperately needed assistance to move from marital dysfunction to function.

Your pastoral staff is here to help you enjoy the oneness and abundant joy you are supposed to experience in marriage (Gen. 2:24; John 10:10), and we are glad we were able to help sixty couples. But we know there are more who have yet to come forward to say they need help. There are reasons why you might not have stepped out yet: feeling ashamed, fearful of how your mate might react, thinking your problem is too far gone to be fixed, afraid of giving up control, and a whole host of other things, I'm sure. I'm here today to challenge you to make 2019 the year your marriage moved to a whole new place with the help of God. That upward movement can, and will, start, as you humble yourself before God and seek and apply godly counsel.

I've been married for thirty-eight years and I know how challenging and exciting marriage can be. My heart goes out to you if your marriage isn't anything you thought it would be, and might more resemble a warzone than anything else. There is hope for you, however. Jesus Christ has repaired and healed many marriages through concepts He has embedded in His inspired Word. If you're struggling and need a lifeline, your pastoral staff is here to help. After all, the quality of our spiritual turf can and will be no greater than the quality of our marriages. I think it is time to move from a state of disease to one of utter health, and that can start with a phone call.

*Two, The Visionary*

- Over the last six months I've been doing a lot of reading regarding *Millennials*, people born between 1980-1999/2000, and *Generation Z*, or young people born between 1999-2015. I've committed to this reading because as the Baby Boomer (born between 1946-1964) generation ages out and moves off the proverbial stage, we are handing the church to these generations, and in many respects we already are. These are also the large swaths of our culture who need a faith relationship with Christ, hence, we must study them to know what makes this tick, how they think, what motivates them, and so forth in order to reach them for God.

What are Millennials like? Thom Rainer devotes an entire book called *The Millennials* in a quest to understand them so the church can reach them. I'll just summarize some of his astute observations from his analysis.

1. They are all about connecting with people and building relationships. The church, therefore, really needs to showcase what koinonia is all about, doesn't it?
2. They are on track to be one of the most educated groups in our nation's history. This means they are thinkers and the church needs to be equipped to answer their questions with sound answers.
3. Only 13% of them see any value in organized religion. Again, we have our work cut out for us to show them the value of biblical truth, a biblical worldview, and what real loving, caring relationships are all about. We also need to be committed to teaching sound doctrine and sound logical thinking in order to guide them toward God as they see the bankruptcy of their vacuous systems of thought.
4. Six out of ten want to receive advice from their parents. We, as Christian parents need to be prepared to speak into their lives, to listen

to them, to hear them out, and to, then, guide them toward wise living as we read about in the Proverbs.

5. Nine out ten of them think it is their responsibility to make a marked difference in the world. As Christians we would agree, but it all depends on what those targets are. These stats tell me we need to make sure we get them plugged into are life areas where they can touch lives.
6. Three out of four desire to be impacted by a mentor. Who is, then, mentoring them? We must make sure we take the time to get to know them to help them along life's winding path. Will you invest your time into their lives? Will you attempt to get to know them? They don't want you to do all the talking either. They're looking for a wise person to listen to them to help them sort through life's complex issues. Seven out of ten say that a cell phone is vital to life. I remember the days when I had to stop my car and find a phone booth to call home. Now you do it wherever you are. Now, just try and find a phone booth. What's that? All of this tells us that if you want to connect with them you're going to have to learn how to text. And they can text fast. Ever watched them? Will you make it a point to text your mentee to see how they are doing?
7. Eighty-seven percent believe their parents are a positive influence in their lives. What a great opportunity to impact them for God as a parent. They are waiting for your input, even if they don't agree.
8. Forty percent have no issue with same-sex marriages. This tells me we will have to work harder to showcase the biblical model of marriage.

I could go on, but time is limited. If we are going to reach this particular generation, then we have much work to do, and we are going to do it. I will continue to study and share what I learn so you can be equipped with how to touch their lives for Christ. Who knows, we might even have to modify a few things around here which are not primary concerns so we can reach them.

Behind them is another massive group: *Generation Z*. What are they like?

1. They are the most racially diverse of any generation before them
2. They are sexually whatever they desire to be. Gender is really irrelevant.
3. Seventy-eight percent of them still believe in God, but only forty-one percent actually attend church, and only eight percent think a religious leader is a role model.
4. They are confused about what constitutes moral truth. While fifty-four percent of Baby Boomers would say lying is wrong, only fifty-percent of Millennials would agree, and only thirty-two percent of *Generation Z* would agree. Twenty-four percent believe that right and wrong change over time. Obviously, we have much work to do when it comes to teaching about how to think soundly and wisely about what constitutes morality. We also must work overtime in making sure they understand the difference between truth and belief. Truth never changes, while beliefs can, and do.
5. This generation is twice as likely to embrace atheism as the last generation. Again, the church must be prepared to speak about why atheism is a failed system, and why the biblical worldview is the correct and more logical one. I spent three hours the other day with two *Generation Z* young men, who were recent university grads. What did they want to talk about? How to push back

against the skepticism fed to them by the university so their faith could grow and flourish. Believe me, it was an interesting discussion and well worth the time investment. Who will you pour your life and time into in 2019 from this age bracket?

As I stated before, we could go on, but it is not my purpose to give you a full-blown study of either of these generations. My goal at this juncture in this State of the Church address is simply to say we, as a church, must understand these generations in order to impact them for Christ, so that they, in turn, can impact their world for Christ. This behooves us as staff, lay leaders, and parishioners to understand our times so we know who to respond. In this respect, we must be the men from the tribe of Issachar for 2019 and beyond:

<sup>32</sup> And of the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do, their chiefs were two hundred; and all their kinsmen were at their command (1 Chr. 12).

Will you join me in studying these generations so, together, we can grow in our understanding of how to help guide them to God so they can be used mightily of Him?