

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE STATE OF THIS CHURCH

Selected Scriptures

By

Steven J. Cole

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Special Message

The State of This Church (Various Scriptures)

At our annual meeting in April, I gave a brief “state of the church” report, outlining some areas where I think we are doing well as a church, along with some areas that we are working on and some other areas where we need to do better. The elders encouraged me to expand my comments into a message for the entire church. So, before we begin our study of Ephesians, I want to vary from my usual exposition of a text of Scripture and give this message on the state of Flagstaff Christian Fellowship.

I am a pastor because many years ago, God impressed on my heart a couple of verses that I couldn't shake. One was Matthew 16:18, where after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Lord responded, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” Among other things, that verse says that building His church is what Christ is doing in history. Also, it is an ironclad promise from the Lord that His church will prevail over all else. I thought, “If Christ has promised to build His church and it will prevail, then I want to be involved in that process.”

Another verse that the Lord put on my heart was Ephesians 5:25, which instructs husbands to love their wives, “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” I knew many who were frustrated with the church and ready to leave it or at least set it on the sidelines, while they joined a parachurch group that seemed to be more exciting.

But I thought, “If the church is Christ's bride and He loves her, and if I love Christ, then I must also love His bride.” Or, if the church is the body of which Christ is the head, I thought, “I can't say that I love the head, but I don't care for His body.” The head and body are one. If I love the head, I must love the body that is connected to it. So I committed myself to do all that I can to help the church be all that God intends it to be.

After 30 years in this process, I am painfully aware of my own inadequacies and shortcomings as a pastor. I am also aware that because the church is made up of imperfect people in a war with powerful enemies, we will never see anything close to a perfect church. But, we can see a healthy church, where God is definitely at work. So, I continually ask God to do a work here for the praise of His glory that would exceed any human explanation. I offer the Lord my paltry loaves and fish and ask Him to multiply them to meet the needs of the multitude. I ask Him to give all of us a greater measure of the fullness of His Spirit, as the churches in the Book of Acts experienced.

One of the frustrations of pastoral work is trying to evaluate the "success" (I prefer the word "fruitfulness") of your labors. It is easy to equate numerical growth with success, but by that criterion, the Mormons are quite successful! Even some of the largest churches that claim to be evangelical do not preach the gospel clearly and do not preach and uphold holiness and separation from this evil world. So you can't just look at your weekly attendance statistics and conclude that you are doing well or not so well.

Another false criterion is to have lots of programs that keep your members busy. It is easy to fill everyone's schedules with church activities, but busyness does not equal fruitfulness. Jesus did *not* say, "My Father is glorified by this, that you keep busy all the time attending church events." He did say (John 15:8), "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples." So, we need constantly to ask, "Are we producing disciples who bear much fruit that glorifies God?"

But, even so, it is not always an easy question to answer. Gene Getz wrote a helpful little book, *The Measure of a Church* ([G/L Regal Books], 1975) in which he argues that the biblical measure of a healthy church is that it is growing in faith, hope, and love, especially in love (based on Eph. 1:15-18; Col. 1:3-6; 1 Thess. 1:2-3). I agree that we ought to keep those three biblical virtues in mind as we assess the health of our church.

But, I want to attempt to evaluate our church in light of our mission statement. If you are not aware that we have such a statement, that is our fault for not communicating it clearly or often enough. But it does stare you in the face on our web home page,

and you hear it stated and expounded in our new member class. The full statement is:

Flagstaff Christian Fellowship exists to show how great God is by helping each person and family grow in fervent love for God, love for one another and love for those without Christ, both locally and globally. We seek to accomplish this through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and through the careful teaching and practice of God's word of truth. One of our main goals is that our church families would be a light-house to the nearby university community, including the international students.

This may be condensed into this shorter purpose statement:

FCF exists to exalt God by helping each person fervently love God and others; and to help make disciples of all people groups.

This statement encompasses the Two Great Commandments and the Great Commission. In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The Great Commission is an extension of the second great commandment: Jesus said (Matt. 28:19-20), "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." If we love people, we will want them to hear the good news, that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that He was raised from the dead, and that He offers eternal life to all that believe on Him. Note that the Great Commission is not just evangelizing the lost, but also teaching them to obey all that Jesus has commanded.

In line with these three priorities (loving God, loving others, making disciples of all peoples), our church has three major distinctives. First, we emphasize expository Bible teaching with a view to equipping the saints for the work of the ministry. Paul wrote (Eph. 4:11-13),

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

On Sunday mornings in our worship services, in Sunday School and our Bible Institute, and to a lesser extent, through our small groups and other ministries, we try to teach God's Word carefully, with a view to application to all of life. The ministry of the Word is foundational to all that we do.

A second distinctive is our college ministry. When I first called Ron Talbott, who was the chairman of the search committee, fifteen years ago, one of my first questions was, is the church near the university there and is there a desire to reach out to the students? One of my ministry models is Charles Simeon, who labored for over 50 years at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He saw many young men at Cambridge University come to Christ and go into either pastoral ministry or missions.

College students have their entire adult lives before them. If we can disciple them for Christ and instill in them a vision for the local church and for His cause worldwide, whether they go into full time ministry or not, we will be sending out workers into the harvest (Matt. 9:38). The Lord laid hold of my life during my college years, and so I want to be used of God to disciple college students.

Our third distinctive is our emphasis on world missions. The apostle John saw a vision of the saints before the Lamb in heaven (Rev. 5:9), "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.'"

God the Father sovereignly chose some, whom He gave to His Son (John 6:37, 39; 17:6, 9). The Son gave Himself on the cross to purchase with His blood, not everyone in the world, but rather these *from* every people group, so that they may be with Him

in glory. The means of bringing these souls to salvation is the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 10:14-15). Thus, we want to give, to go, and to pray to the end that the full number of His redeemed would come to salvation, to the praise of the glory of His grace.

With all of this as a backdrop, let me mention some specific areas where it seems to me that we are doing well; some areas that we are working on; and, some areas where we need to do more. If I fail to mention an area that you serve in that is doing well, please forgive me. The oversight is not intentional.

AREAS TO BE ENCOURAGED ABOUT:

1. Responsiveness to the Word

First, I am thankful for all who encourage me with how God's Word is taking hold in your lives. 2 Timothy 4:3-4 warns that the time will come when those that profess to know Christ will not endure sound doctrine, but will accumulate teachers who tickle their ears, in accord with their own desires. I am thankful that those words do not apply here at this time! Although I often feel overwhelmed with my inadequacy in preaching the Word, your responsiveness to God's Word is a great encouragement to me.

Behind the scenes are those who work at duplicating CD's, and those who work at the soundboard and visual media projecting the Scriptures and outlines. And, of course, the office help duplicates the printed sermons.

2. The way that the body ministers in love

I often see examples of the body serving others in love. There is a network of women who take meals to women who have just had a baby or who have a serious illness. Others organize and host wedding and baby showers. Others rally around a member in need with practical care. Many work behind the scenes in the kitchen for socials, cleanup, preparing for communion, making coffee, etc. A team of committed workers serves the college ministry by preparing meals for the students each week and cleaning up afterwards. I often see people one-on-one praying with others after the services. Many others make it a point to greet visitors and make them feel welcome. All of these ministries are encouraging.

3. Mission vision and focus

In addition to our annual budget for missions (about 19% of our total budget), we raise probably double that amount in other ways to help support missions. The Women's Missionary Fellowship sponsors the annual Craft Sale in the Fall, plus several yard sales and other projects throughout the year. We raise money to send students and others on short-term mission projects. We give to help sponsor pastors at the Bible school in Sierra Leone. The list goes on and on.

In addition, we are now seeing a number of Advocacy Teams (A-teams) raised up to focus on ministry to those who have gone out from FCF into full time missionary work. In that regard, we have seen God raise up many young people to serve in missions long term, with several reaching out into Muslim or Hindu countries. Our A-teams are especially trying to serve these newer missionaries, communicating with them frequently, praying for them, and sending them things that they need. Sending out missionaries is expensive. Many of you are giving sacrificially to help in this vital ministry. It is good to see how God is working through us around the globe.

4. Faithful, generous giving

Although I purposely do not know who gives or how much anyone gives, it is evident that there are many faithful, generous givers in this church. Without any pledge drives or special stewardship emphasis, our giving to the general fund in the last fiscal year exceeded our budget by about \$18,000. We also have been able to make our monthly payments of about \$13,000 on the new church property. I do not teach tithing. Rather, I believe that the New Testament principle is that each one should give in proportion as God has graciously provided for you, out of a heart of love and gratitude to Him. Thank you for being faithful givers!

5. Faithful youth workers and other workers

Although we never seem to have a waiting list, the Lord has raised up the workers that we have needed for teaching our youth. The AWANA program ministers to about 100 kids each year, some of whom are not from Christian homes. Others work with our Sunday School and other youth programs. While our homes should be the primary training ground for our children, I thank God for

godly men and women at church who had an influence on my children. Only eternity will reveal their impact.

In addition, our worship teams faithfully lead us each week. Our ushers and greeters help things to flow on Sunday mornings. I'm sure that there are more ministries than I have mentioned.

AREAS WE ARE WORKING ON:

There are a number of ongoing ministries that are works in progress. Here are just a few:

1. The need for adequate facilities

Several years ago, we realized that we cannot grow much beyond our current numbers unless we have more adequate facilities. Our sanctuary is close to 80 percent full on many Sundays, especially in the second service. Our parking is abysmal. Our Sunday school rooms are inadequate and overcrowded. Our nursery is old and run down. We are landlocked. We spent hours in brainstorming and planning. We tried to figure out ways to make do with or improve these facilities, since the location is ideal for the college ministry. But, nothing worked out.

Then the Lord provided the property at Equestrian Estates. We moved in that direction. Just before we committed more funds to develop that property, many factors came together at the same time to indicate that the Lord wanted us to sell that property and wait on Him for something more centrally located. Currently, the Equestrian property is for sale and we are working with a generous man from another church to purchase (way under market value) four acres on the corner of Fourth Street and Soliere, where we would construct a new worship facility. After the Equestrian property sells, we hope to own the Fourth Street land free and clear, but would need to raise the funds for construction. We also hope to be able to retain the main property here for future college and other ministries.

I am thankful for those who already have spent and will spend more countless hours working on this. I am also thankful for those who have given and are giving generously to this need. It is an ongoing project that we will be working on for years to come.

2. Shepherding the flock and equipping the saints for ministry

This is an ongoing and often overwhelming task. We have many that attend FCF, but that is the extent of their involvement. They are not in any small groups nor are they serving in any capacity. Our aim is to equip all for ministry, so that each member of the body fulfills his or her God-given purpose. We currently have a new member class to orient people to the church. We need several teams that are trained and committed to call on our church visitors. We are trying to have socials after church every month or two as a place where we can get to know one another and build relationships. We have small groups and Forums of Four that meet at various times. We are developing the Bible Institute, offering about three classes each semester. We are also working on a better way to shepherd the flock on an individual basis.

The church web site could be improved, but at least it is functional on many levels. We are getting almost 3,000 unique visitors per month, which I'm told is very good for a church web site. I know of many that use both the printed and audio sermons on the site. I often get emails from people around the country and world who have personal questions or comments.

3. Prayer

We do pray in many different settings, but corporate prayer, like personal prayer, can always use improvement. I'm not sure how to organize it or promote it, but we need groups of people who are committed to pray for missions, pray for the lost in this city, pray for our property needs, pray for the various ministries, and pray for the many personal needs of the body.

There are many other areas that we continue to work on. Let me conclude by mentioning...

AREAS WHERE WE NEED TO DO BETTER:

I can only touch on three areas:

1. Worship

I believe that our worship teams do a good job, but I must be honest in saying that I am not content with what often seems to be apathetic worship on the part of the congregation. I know, this is a *Baptist* church, not a charismatic church, so maybe I shouldn't expect more! But I do! While I disagree with some of the theology

and excessive emotionalism of our charismatic brethren, I do appreciate their intensity in worship.

Our public worship should convey that we treasure God above all else. We aim to display His worth and magnificence. Our aim in worship is not to run through a list of songs or hymns or to listen to a sermon. Our aim is to encounter the living God so that we see all that He is to us in Christ. While it would be wrong to work up feelings for feelings' sake, I can't help but think that our apathy with worship dishonors God. A visitor walking in here should be able to see that we love and honor God. We need to praise Him with all that we are. He deserves no less!

2. Local outreach

We have a few who are doing street evangelism each week. Others preach at the Sunshine Rescue Mission and teach Bible studies at the jail. We offer training in evangelism from time to time. But, we do not see many local people being genuinely converted and coming into the fellowship of the church. I'm not sure what to do about this, either personally or corporately. I'm just making the need known. Please pray!

3. Social ministry as an expression of Christ's love and as a means for witness

I'm not good at organizing or administering such things. But the Bible says a lot about ministry to the poor. I'd like to see us doing more, not just to dole out money or food, but to help people become responsible and productive. We could offer English lessons; literacy classes; tutoring for poor children; help on how to get a job or manage finances; or similar ministries. There is a need for an evangelical crisis pregnancy ministry. And, we face a constant stream of homeless or other people needing help.

Conclusion

Overall, I believe that the Lord is at work in our midst. We should be encouraged, but we should never become complacent or content with where we're at. I want to see this city changed because of Flagstaff Christian Fellowship. So I challenge each of you to commit yourself first to the Lord and then to His work here, in accordance with your spiritual gifts. By His grace, this church can show forth His glory to this lost, dark world!

Application Questions

1. Often people complain about areas in the church that are in line with their spiritual gifts. Administrators complain about the disorganization. Evangelists complain about the lack of outreach. Etc. Where are you complaining? What does God want you to do about it?
2. Are there other biblical criteria that we should use to evaluate the health of our church? If so, what are they?
3. How could we improve our mission statement, to streamline it to make it more focused, clear, or memorable?
4. Do we have programs or activities that are not in line with our mission statement? If so, which ones? Should we drop them?

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