

God's Bible Men Assess Congregational Health

Growing in Faith and Love

Pastor David P. Kolander

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Congregational Health Described

I would not be surprised at all if, during this symposium on congregational health, we do not come to a universal agreement on the definition of congregational health. That can almost be expected to be the case because God does not speak of a universal definition with which we must agree. In fact, it may be better not to worry about spending too much effort seeking to agree on a specific definition, as long as we do not allow a wrong emphasis or approach to color our thinking about congregational health.

However you *define* congregational health, this is one way Scripture *describes* it:

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing (2 Thessalonians 1:3).*

Growing in Christian faith and love – that is the kind of congregational health which pleases our Lord and therefore occupies our prayers on behalf of God's people: "Lord, help me as a shepherd to help your dearly loved lambs grow in their certainty that your Son is their perfect substitute. Lead those lambs to show their gratitude for that certainty with lives which reflect toward you and others the love which you have displayed toward others and them."

Scripture provides an objective way to carry out the growth in this subjective area of congregational health in the opening letter of the apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians. There St. Paul gives this prelude to his encouragement not to get taken in by the false wisdom of those who feign having a greater knowledge:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit (Colossians 1:3-8).

Growth in Christian faith and love that springs from the hope of the gospel – that is the kind of congregational health which causes apostles to praise God in heaven. It also emboldens earth-bound pastors of our day, just like Paul and Epaphras of old, to entrust those they serve to the effects of the fruit-producing message of "God's grace in all its truth" which they proclaim. "Lord, help me know your gospel better so I can share your gospel more so that there can be whatever increase in faith and love you desire through that gospel, all of which makes it such a privilege to serve your name -- whether I think I ever see much of that fruit or not."

* Biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. c1984. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

This paper is specifically meant to list scriptural examples of how “God’s Bible Men Assess Congregational Health.” As we do that, my intent is to intersperse objective, scriptural examples of different men of God approaching the Lord on behalf of the people they were serving with objectively stated scriptural reminders of how congregational health looks.

With this approach, my goal is to give us as God’s Bible men an opportunity for devotional refreshment and relaxation before tackling the issues of how we are doing today and what we might do in the future in the area of congregational health. I pray that these words will correct you where that correction of sin is needed; that they will comfort you where that comfort of forgiveness through Christ is applied; and that they will encourage you as God’s blood-bought children to glory in the opportunity to be growing in faith and love yourself – and in the privilege of being used by your Lord to help others do the same.

Men of God Are Used to Help God’s People Grow in Faith and Love

We are God’s men today.

Isn’t it amazing that the Lord allows men like you and me to join a list that includes men like Moses and Nehemiah and David and John and Paul? This accomplishes at least two things for us. First of all, it reminds us of what a high calling our Lord has given us by leading us to believe in his Son through the gospel. Secondly, it reminds us of how low we have the capability of falling, when we neglect to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. David and Paul, for example, knew in a very special way the glory of their Lord’s grace because of the shame of their own sin. We know that glory for the very same reason.

Yet though we are men of unclean lips, or men of faltering lips, or men of lips that seem too young to speak or too old to relate, we are men whose skin has felt the washing of rebirth and whose ears have heard the “Go in peace” and whose hearts have believed, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are” (1 John 3:1)!

We know that it is a total impossibility for us to stand before the people of God as men of God through any merit or worthiness on our part. Yet God gives us that privilege. The calling of God does not bring before God’s people a man who knows it all, but a man who has been given all by the one who has called him to his service. Our dear Lord wants the people he has called us to serve to know the very same thing about themselves.

We listen to God’s men of old.

As they treat God’s people as God’s people

Isn’t that the spirit displayed by the apostle Paul throughout his epistles? He approached God’s people as one who did not deserve to be one of God’s people himself. He could not help but marvel that he had the joy of being chosen by God to share such mysteries. And it was his privilege to speak of the lofty status of the people he was addressing.

To the Galatians: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:3).

To the Ephesians: “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers” (Ephesians 3:15-16).

To the Philippians: “I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Philippians 1:4b-5).

To the Colossians: “To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse” (Colossians 1:2).

To the Thessalonians: “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).

To the Thessalonians again: “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).

To the Romans: “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Romans 1:11-12).

To the Corinthians: “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way...” (1 Corinthians 1:4-5a).

To the Corinthians again: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14).

The people we serve are people with whom we want to share the grace of God so they can understand the peace of God that goes beyond understanding.

The people we serve prompt our thanksgiving to God as we hear of their faith and love. They are miracles of God himself.

The people we serve are our partners to be cherished and trained and sent out in the ministry of the gospel.

The people we serve are holy through Christ and faithful to the word of Christ.

The people we serve are going to be our undeserved glory when Jesus comes again on that glorious day.

The people we serve need encouragement and strength.

The people we serve give us encouragement and strength in our daily work.

The people we serve have been granted many gifts in God’s grace to serve him with joy and purpose.

The people we serve have received the Lord’s benediction -- both now and forever.

The people we serve are the people of God!

That spirit of St. Paul is echoed in the words of St. Peter that each of us pastors heard at his ordination:

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 4:2-3).

There is nothing special or unique about us, but there is something most special and unique about a God who would let us oversee for a little while on earth the hearts and souls of people he wants to live with him for all eternity.

That spirit of St. Paul and St. Peter is also the spirit of St. John.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ the righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

We don't hate people when they sin; we hurt for people when they sin. But we love to tell the story of the Advocate. That message is meant for the whole world. It is for the whole world that Jesus made the atoning sacrifice. As a result, it is the whole world that gets our attention and our prayer.

Paul, Peter and John – men of God whose words to us men of God lead us to look at the people of God in ways described by the hymn writer:

I love your Church, O God,
Your saints in ev'ry land,
Dear as the apple of your eye
And graven on your hand.

For them my tears shall fall;
For them my prayers ascend;
For them my cares and toils be giv'n
Till toils and cares shall end. (*Christian Worship* 533:3-4)

Paul, Peter and John – men of God who give us men of God examples of how to look upon the people of God we serve, and in so doing, also give us comfort for when we fail to hold our people in such high regard or when we treat our high calling in a negligent or inappropriate way.

One thing that we do not want to forget is that the people we serve in Christian congregations are healthy. They are alive and well. Their old self needs beating down, and their new self will never evidence itself as much as it should. Nevertheless, by virtue of the fact that they believe in Jesus, they are alive in Christ.

Paul says of the people we serve the same thing he said of the Ephesians:

But as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air... Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his graces, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-7).

It is only healthy and alive people who are able to enjoy this kind of perspective about life – both now and in the future.

The devil is determined to kill God's people and to devour them. He does all he can to trip them up in their good fight of faith and to cause a little leaven of spiritual weakness to destroy the whole loaf of dependence on God. The way to keep them healthy, when they are tempted to fall or when they do in fact fall, is to remember what they need to remain God's children – the same Word of God which made them God's children in the first place.

As they take God's people through the cycle of repentance

A few chapters later in Ephesians, St. Paul provides an excellent pattern to keep in mind as we shepherd our flocks:

For you were once darkness,
but now you are light in the Lord.
Live as children of light (Ephesians 5:8).

These are declarative facts. These words do not call for manipulation, whining, complaining or brow-beating. They are words which reflect the reality of life for a child of God, who still bears the burden of his old self. They are words which speak of the everyday cycle of repentance for a child of God:

“I need a Savior;
I have a Savior;
I want to live for my Savior.”

Our message to the Savior’s people is just that: “You need a Savior; you have a Savior; live for your Savior.”

This constant and repetitive cycle of correction, comfort and encouragement – in other words, appropriate uses of God’s law and gospel – is a way of life for those who know Christ. This correction, comfort and encouragement nurtures individuals and congregations that are growing in faith and love.

Keeping the spirit of the apostles in mind, we can encourage each other to make this the way we look at people, talk to people, correspond with people, preach to people, teach people. Look at them as people who need the cross, who are redeemed by the cross, and who want to follow the cross, all the while bearing the hard cross of Christian discipleship. The joy of knowing Christ crucified does not take away the earthly reality that God’s people need to deal with the Savior’s description of discipleship: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

“Denying oneself” is not easy. The cross of denying oneself requires the regular drowning of the old self and the constant feeding of the new man. On the basis of their holy standing before God, we remind our people:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The people we serve are righteous and holy saints of God. They have a lofty calling. They are to daily put on the righteous and holy new self. Yet their old self prevents them from perfectly carrying out God’s expectation of his people. Understanding the struggle our people face will remove any unrealistic expectations we may have about the level of their sanctification. At the same time, we will not minimize the holy standards the Lord has set for his purchased people. These standards were set for them by their God and met for them by his holy Son.

As they approach God’s people evangelically

This approach to the people of God we serve is the evangelical approach.

It is the approach which sees people as “fellow redeemed” and “dearly beloved.”

It is the approach which aches for the people we serve as if in the pains of childbirth, because we know how difficult it is to confess sin, stay confident in Christ’s forgiveness, and walk in the light of the Lord.

It is the approach which seeks to set an evangelical tone and atmosphere in how we conduct ourselves personally and organize our ministry pastorally.

It is the approach which refrains from being negative in our outlook or pessimistic in our demeanor. We live in the joy of the resurrection.

It is the approach which avoids an attitude of activism, thinking that the more we do, the better we are or the more faithfully we are carrying out God's calling.

It is the approach which endears a shepherd to his lambs when they must speak of a sin, when they need guidance for a dilemma, and when they lie still, awaiting God's final call.

It is the approach which shows that a pastor is truly concerned about congregational spiritual health because he is concerned about each individual's spiritual health and not so much about congregational polity, administration or survival.

The emphasis on maintaining this kind of attitude toward our members also should not give the impression that success or failure in ministry will depend on whether we can be perfectly evangelical or not. There is a fine line between looking at ourselves as indispensable in God's kingdom and as important in God's kingdom. Indispensable we are not. Funerals for pastors have failed to stop the advance of the kingdom. But important we are. Three of Paul's letters were designed to show the importance of those who share the Word in a public way. What an encouragement to know our worth to God, both as blood-bought souls and as ministers of his gospel. This is what Paul communicated so clearly to Timothy.

...Command certain men not to teach false doctrines nor to devote themselves to myths... (1 Timothy 1:3b-4a).

If you point these things out to the brothers you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed (1 Timothy 4:6).

Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life -- not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace (2 Timothy 1:8-9a).

As in so many areas of Christian doctrine, so in the area of the public ministry there will be two seemingly irreconcilable "pillars":

first of all, the truth that God does all the work of creating and sustaining faith,

and, secondly, the truth that God asks us to do the work of proclaiming the Word which accomplishes this divine work.

In his grace and wisdom, God uses the second pillar to accomplish the first. As a result, evangelical ministry recognizes that our use of both law and gospel is essential for people to grow in faith and love.

That is why the apostle Paul as a man of God confronted sin and false doctrine so persistently. He did not want anything to take God's people away from the assurance of the Savior's forgiveness or to darken Scripture's core teaching about the justification of the sinner.

Paul's exclamation to the Galatians – "I am so astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6) – was followed by a glorious proclamation of the simple, substitutionary work of Christ: "You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). This is what Paul wanted his dear Galatians to know and cling to. Downplaying doctrinal differences is not the way to further growth in faith and love.

In a similar way, Paul's "expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:13) was followed, after that wicked man's repentance, with the loving command, "You ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Corinthians 2:7-8). God's people exhibit growth in faith and love by warning someone who has lost Christian faith and love to turn from his sin. Ignoring public sin is not the way to further growth in faith and love.

As the people in our congregations grow in faith and love through the ministry of their shepherds and the work of their God, they will also pray for their pastors to do what they have been called to do with that work-producing Word.

The servants you have called and to your Church are giving
 Preserve in doctrine pure and holiness of living.
 Your Spirit fill their hearts and charge their words with pow'r;
 What they should boldly speak, oh, give them in that hour! (*Christian Worship* 546, st. 4)

Men of God respond, "I thank my God every time I remember you" (Philippians 1:3).

As they list the qualifications for serving God's people

Men of God also take seriously the Lord's desire that we keep our doctrine pure and our living holy. In those three pastoral epistles in which St. Paul shows the importance of our work, he also makes clear the importance of our example.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

We rightly believe that the personality of the pastor does not save anyone from their sins. Yet the lifestyle of the pastor is most definitely considered by God to be an important dynamic of his important office. Because we are handling the mysteries of God for the benefit of people for whom Christ died, our Lord wants our pattern of life to reflect the majesty of the awesome trust we have been given. As repentant children of God, we serve as examples to the flock.

God's basic concern is that the "ministry not be discredited" (2 Corinthians 6:3). This is what Paul expressed when he was compelled to defend his own character against false accusations. Similarly, Paul spoke to Titus about the importance not only of what he said but how he said it.

In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us (Titus 2:7b-8).

In essence, this is no different than what Paul told the Ephesians about one of the results of pastors and teachers preparing God's people for works of service:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ (Ephesians 4:14-15).

As God's people grow in faith and love, they are growing up into him who is their Head. What grace it is that God allows us, who desperately need that grace every moment of our lives, to shepherd the people he has brought into his fold. The grace that God has displayed in us is the same grace he has displayed in the lives of the people we serve. We truly are partners together in the gospel of Christ.

As they repeat the facts to God's people

What has been entrusted to us we entrust to others. That is the purpose and result of ministerial training and pastoral work. The natural result of our own study of the Word will be personal growth in faith and love. God wants us to display such faith and love as we proclaim the message he has given us. The Holy Spirit uses that message to promote such growth in faith and love in the people who listen to what God has to say through us.

What God has to say through us are the facts of what God has done for us throughout history and through his Son. Men of God proclaim the facts. That is the seed from which congregational health sprouts.

That was the seed from which grew the New Testament church. The Acts of the Apostles gives several examples of how the men of God told people the facts of what God had done – facts which they could either believe by God's grace or reject in their own foolishness.

According to Acts 2, Peter proclaimed the facts of Joel's prophecy, David's psalm of life, and the Savior's departure from the tomb. According to Acts 3, Peter proclaimed the facts of what the Jewish leaders did to Jesus, Moses' words about the coming prophet, and Abraham's covenant with God, through whom all peoples of the earth would be blessed. Then according to Acts 4, Peter proclaimed the facts of the crucifixion of the Christ, the resurrection of the Christ, and the truth that salvation is found in no one else but Christ. These were the facts which created healthy people in increasing numbers, including "a large number of priests (who) became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Acts 6 introduces us to Stephen, whose sermon about the facts of God is recorded in Acts 7. Starting with the call of Abram from Ur of the Chaldees, Stephen recounted the story of the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and David. He also stated that his hearers had betrayed "the Righteous One," whose coming the prophets had predicted. The Jewish leaders rejected Stephen's words, but the point is that Stephen was proclaiming objective facts about what had historically taken place.

Acts 7 introduces us to Saul, who, as the converted Paul, rehearsed the facts of spiritual life time and time again, such as in his sermon in Pisidian Antioch.

“The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country. He endured their conduct in the desert; he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years. After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul, son of Kish... After removing Saul, he made David their king... From this man’s descendants, God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel... The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus... Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed... But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. We tell you the good news” (Acts 13:17-32, excerpts).

Some believed the message; others did not. Some of the others who did not believe the message expelled Paul and Barnabas from their region. While those who accepted the message were likely sad to see Paul and Barnabas treated in this way, Luke tells us that “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). They were thankful to know the facts that others had rejected.

In none of these examples is there really an emphasis on the responses of faith or unbelief, health or sickness. The tone is more one of a declaration of a fact: there will be some who believe the message and some who will not. We want to make sure that we are relating the facts. As we do so, we have the confidence that there will be at least some – maybe many – who will be growing in faith and love.

Even the man of God who is the Son of God stated the facts. As he walked to Emmaus with the two disciples, he told them what they needed to know: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). The Holy Spirit did not see fit to record all the facts which Jesus spoke in this Easter conversation. Perhaps that can be an encouragement to us, if we lament that we are not able to speak the facts as perfectly as Jesus did. After all, everything Jesus did was done to enable us to be looked upon as perfect in his Father’s sight, despite our frailties and imperfections.

As they serve God’s people in an imperfect world

We perfect people through Christ shepherd perfect people in an imperfect world. That imperfect world of their own sin and the allure of the world pollute both us and them. Men of God have always centered their words on the promises of God which lift us out of the muck of sin, even as they have always confronted specific sin in very specific ways. This is very evident when reviewing how some of Old Testament men of God spoke to God about the people they were serving, often in times of great physical or spiritual distress.

As we now look at a few Old Testament examples, keep in mind that these spokesmen for the Lord were really preaching to “two Israels” – Israel according to the flesh and Israel according to the spirit. Some of the people of God were not really people of God. They were unbelievers who were still under the theocratic rule of the Lord. Even though we assume that all the people we serve are believers unless they prove otherwise, we nevertheless recognize that the sinful nature which is still part of their make-up is every bit as much an unbeliever as was the actual unbeliever among the children of Israel. In a sense, preaching to the “two selves” is no different than preaching to the “two Israels.”

Think of Moses in Exodus 32. Moses reacted to the sin at Sinai by holding God to his promise. After observing the shame of the people’s golden calf worship, the Lord told Moses he wanted to destroy them and make Moses into a great nation instead of them. Moses said to the Lord:

“Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your

descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky...” Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened (Exodus 32:12b-14).

Moses’ intercession on behalf of God’s people did not keep the Lord from carrying out divine punishment in the form of having the Levites kill 3,000 “brothers and friends and neighbors” (Exodus 32:27) and in the form of a plague and in the form of a promise that there would be more punishment still to come. Yet in the midst of these punishments for this unfathomable rebellion, Moses still prayed: “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! ... But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exodus 32:32). God then told Moses to continue leading the people to the place he had promised.”

God’s people fail. Some of those who at one time were God’s people leave the fellowship of faith. Men of God pray for the people of God and continue leading the people of God. This leading of God’s people may include carrying out divine discipline, but it always includes the desire to assure the people we serve that God has forgiven their sin. So great is our desire to give this assurance that we too may even plead that our name be removed from God’s book of believers than have someone else fall under the wrath of the Lord.

Think of David when he prayed privately before the Lord. Through Nathan David had just received the promise of God that his throne would be established forever by a king who would reign forever. David’s sense of feeling overwhelmed did not keep him from remembering God’s people in his prayer of thanks for what God had promised to him as an individual.

“Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, O Sovereign Lord, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant. Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign Lord?... For the sake of your word and according to your will, you have done this great thing and made it known to your servant. How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. And who is like your people Israel – the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You have established your people as your very own forever, and you, O Lord, have become their God” (2 Samuel 7:18-24).

We men of God receive spiritual thrill after spiritual thrill as we delve into the very words of God and carry out the privilege to serve as one of God’s ministers. Yet this study and service is never done merely for our sake but for the benefit of the people we serve. The people we serve have been redeemed by God for himself, and our privilege is to continue to point them to the eternal King whose work has guaranteed them eternal life.

Think also of David when he prayed publicly before the whole assembly. David had just observed the marvelous outpouring of gifts for the building of the temple that his son and successor would accomplish. The same amazement that God would allow a human being – and a sinful one at that – to be part of his glorious work filled David’s public words with as much wonder as his words to the Lord in private.

“But who am I, and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope... O Lord, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided” (1 Chronicles 29:14-19).

Men of God declare objective truths in straightforward ways: “Everything comes from you, and we have given only what comes from your hand.” Men of God pray for the spiritual health of God’s people: “Keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever.” And men of God pray for those who come after them and follow up on the ministry they began: “Give my son Solomon wholehearted devotion... to build the palatial structure for which I have provided.”

Think of King Jehoshaphat and King Hezekiah. In both instances, these kings of Judah were being attacked by enemies. Older enemies of Israel (the Moabites and the Ammonites) were attacking the people of Jehoshaphat’s day, while a more recent military power (the nation of Assyria) was tormenting the people of Hezekiah’s day. A “vast army” stood before Jehoshaphat, while Hezekiah had just read a letter from Sennacherib of Assyria in which Sennacherib insulted the God of Israel and said that the children of Israel would fare no better than any of the other cities or nations the Assyrians had recently defeated. Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah did not seek to out-talk or out-maneuver their enemies on their own. They prayed to the Lord.

“God of our fathers, are you not the God who in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you... But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt... See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us an inheritance. O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you” (2 Chronicles 20:6-12).

“Give ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God. It is true, O Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by men’s hands. Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God” (2 Kings 19:16-19).

Men of God do not minimize the power of the enemy nor hide the difficulty of the situation. But they also do not panic. Men of God know that “though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident,” because “the Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27:5,1) So men of God ask the one who alone can deliver them from evil to deliver all his people from evil.

And think of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah during and after the Babylonian captivity. These men of God led their people in confession to God because of how their sins against God had brought about the very problems they were experiencing.

In chapter 9 of his book, Daniel states that he had come to understand Jeremiah’s prophecy about the captivity lasting seventy years. As he recognized the reason for which he and his fellow countrymen had been wrested from their homeland and forced to go through such ignominy, he turned to the Lord and “pleaded with him in power and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes.” Daniel’s prayer has become a model for all men of God.

“O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

“Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us

because of our unfaithfulness to you. O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him...

“Now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us...

“Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name” (Daniel 9:4-19).

About 150 years after the time of Daniel, Ezra led a wave of exiles back to Jerusalem. He was confronted with a different dilemma. Many people of Israel, including a number of priests and Levites, had taken wives from the nations with whom they were not to intermingle. Ezra said he was appalled at what had taken place. He prayed to the Lord:

“Oh my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens... But now for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not deserted us in our bondage...

“But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave your servants the prophets... What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved” (Ezra 9:6-13).

Just a little over a decade later Nehemiah spoke in a similar way when he heard that the walls of Jerusalem were still in shambles even though thousands of people had gone back to Judah over the years. News about the disrepair of the walls and the despair of the inhabitants caused him to weep and to pray:

“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses...

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name” (Nehemiah 1:5-11)...

Nehemiah was a man of action and planning. He was bold in approaching his king for permission to go to Jerusalem. He was skilled in organizing work forces and giving assignments for prescribed tasks in repairing the city walls. He was wise in the ways of the world so as to forestall the efforts of God’s enemies to squelch the wall repair efforts, and he prepared God’s people to defend themselves against those who threatened bodily harm. These are gifts that men of God have in varying measures and to various degrees. These are gifts for

which to be grateful and to be used with humble confidence. These are gifts which are of great benefit to the church of God. Men of God want to treasure those gifts that they and other men of God may have.

But Nehemiah knew there was more. There was a fundamental and universal issue with which to deal. Men of God get to the point of the source of our difficulties and problems – sin. Men of God lead their people in word and by example in acknowledging their weaknesses and frailties and their need to depend on the promises of God for redemption and rest. Men of God know that they can entrust themselves and their people to the one who calls himself the Lord. He forgives, and he enables us to live free from fear in the peace and joy of that pardon.

As they point God's people to God's Son

Congregational health cannot be objectively defined, but we do know that it can be wonderfully described. The night before he died, Jesus told his disciples:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Men of God tell the facts of God and confess sins to God and entrust their people to God, but it is only the Son of God who can truly make congregational health possible through his Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to carry out his “new command” by giving us new life and a new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

As a result, God's shepherds lead their flocks again and again to the events of that night when Jesus gave us his new command. That night Jesus began to bring to fulfillment what the prophets had spoken.

The Son of Man was handed over to his enemies, but not before he had left his Holy Supper as an ongoing source of comfort for all who knew why he allowed himself to go to his bitter foes.

The Son of Man was placed into a tomb for the dead, but not before he had declared his “paid in full” and committed himself to his Father who was so very well pleased with him.

The Son of Man remained in that tomb, but only for as much time as God had long ago determined. When he became alive, he departed that tomb to tell the very foes of hell who rejoiced at his seeming demise that he truly was the conqueror. Then he appeared to his disciples to tell them and us that peace is ours and that we possess the very keys that open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

It is no wonder that God's people “love one another.” They put all their hopes in the One who has been through it all and who has defeated all. Therefore he is their all in all – the One who makes them alive and well.

Congregational Health Displayed

The congregational health in which God's people “bear with one another in love” and “make every effort to keep the unity of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3) comes from men of God assuring them that “he chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4).

The congregational health in which God's people “in humility consider others better than (themselves)” and “look not only to (their) own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4) comes from men of God assuring them that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

The congregational health in which God's people “clothe (themselves) with compassion, kindness, humility gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12) comes from men of God assuring them that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

The congregational health in which God's people bear the Spirit's fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23) comes from men of God assuring them that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13).

The congregational health in which God's people "offer (their) bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (Romans 12:1) comes from men of God assuring them "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:1-2).

The congregational health in which God's people "go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15) comes from men of God assuring them of the good news that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

In the next two papers we will discuss different ways to get at the subject of congregational health in our congregations today and in the future. I pray the discussion is spirited, but I hope we don't make things too complicated. Don't worry unduly about the definition of congregational health or the apparent lack of its outward manifestation. Concern yourself rather about figuring out godly, evangelical ways of carrying out the ministry of the Word and connecting people in a natural and intentional way to the means of grace. That is the only way God's description of congregational health will ever be displayed.

And displayed it will be -- just as it now is -- as we sow the seed -- as men of God have always done.

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

These are the people of God we men of God serve. We get to help them grow in faith and love.

God's Bible Men Assess Congregational Health: A Reaction

Prof. Paul E. Zell

[A Symposium on Congregational Health
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, September 21, 2009]

I am president of the Mequon-Thiensville Lions Club. Mine is one of around 600 Lions Clubs in Wisconsin. Founded in 1950. 60-some members. Businessmen, plumbers, factory workers, ministers, farmers, retirees. Around this county we're known for the summer's biggest party. At Lions Fest down at Village Park this past June we played music non-stop and served 1,600 chicken dinners, 50 bushels of roasted corn and 100 barrels of beer. That went a long way toward raising the \$40,000 we hope to donate to local charities this year.

Personally I think we're a happy and healthy organization, and I'd bet most other members would agree. The positive feedback I get is reassuring. But if things ever started to come apart -- if we couldn't meet our expenses; if we could no longer recruit young men to join up; if our meetings degenerated into nasty squabbling; if we started losing longtime members; if some scandal broke out in our midst -- I'd be all over that situation. I'd call special meetings to get our problems out in the open and clear the air. I'd appoint a task force to analyze the data and propose solutions. I'd reexamine our constitution. (Imagine how many more members we'd have if we admitted women!) I'd refurbish that old sign out on Mequon Road. I'd study our history to see how our forefathers solved problems and visit other clubs for more of the same. I'd drop the old newsletter and bring the website up to speed. I wouldn't just advertise for new members. I'd make sure we personally hit all the local storefronts and businesses and asked people why they aren't joining. Tell you what. I think we need to be doing some of that even while we're happy and healthy. After all, you never know what sort of challenge is coming down the pike.

Alright. I'm not really president of the local Lions Club. From what I observe, it's a fine civic organization, but I've never attended a meeting. Yet even if the first two paragraphs put me at the head of the local Liars Club, can you see where I'm going here? I have the "club president spirit" spooking around inside of me. If I see things going well in my congregation, I figure we must be doing things right. If the landscaping around our building looks spiffy and the carpeting is clean and the music is inspiring and the organ loan is getting paid off and we're still at full staff and getting new members and even thinking about a building program and everybody's smiling, I don't mind if folks occasionally mention what a good job I've been doing as captain of the ship. But if it always seems like there's no money and we just had to terminate somebody's call and the voter's meetings seem interminable and the church council doesn't have a plan and members are complaining or not showing up or out looking for a better church, then I'm still inclined to be that club president. I'll briefly join the chorus of those who wonder whether this church is dying, but I'm not going to let that happen on my watch. So I'll assess our communication methods, including my preaching, and consider changing them. I'll assess how we gather our income and how we spend it. I'll assess our organizational structure and give the meeting agendas a fresh look. I'll assess the paint color in the narthex and the seating arrangement in the nave and I'll assess at how worship takes place in churches that don't seem to be having our problems and copy those we can copy as long as we can stay Lutheran. I'll sit up late at night talking to the leaders and formulating a plan of action. Then I'll make sure we do this and do that and work more and harder and smarter and better. All so I can lead my flock back to what I perceive to be congregational health.

God's *Bible Men Assess Congregational Health*. I'd like to thank the members of the planning committee for putting Scripture first. Thank you also to Pastor David Kolander for asking, "What does the *Lord* say about a Christian congregation's health?" Someone may take our presenter to task for seeming to dismiss a pastor's concern for "congregational polity, administration or survival" (p 8). Another may see a danger in his warning against "thinking that the more we do, the better we are or the more faithfully we are carrying out God's calling" (p 8). There is certainly no legitimate excuse, one might say, for pastors who in hazardous straits refuse to consider a change of course. Nor is it realistic, another might add, to think that today's parish

pastor would show no concern for how his congregation manages its skills and resources. Yet we did not read anything in this first essay that makes excuses for apathy toward administration or for fearful failure to make difficult decisions out of love for the Lord and for his church. Instead Pastor Kolander has begun where we needed to begin. He has given us a crystal clear reminder from Scripture of who we are and what we do in Christ.

We pastors are sinners. We bring no worthiness of our own to the workplace. The longer a pastor serves his congregation, the more noticeable the unclean lips and the wicked hearts and the dirty minds and the lazy hands of its members. There is plenty of evidence of the sinful nature with which both pastors and their people were born. Yet “one thing that we do not want to forget is that the people we serve in Christian congregations are healthy ... alive and well” (p 6). That is a bold statement by our first essayist, drawn from the equally bold statement of the apostle Paul.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:4-6).

Pastors are Bible men who listen to the Word of God as they “treat God’s people as God’s people” (pp 4-6). That statement by our essayist is of critical significance. We Bible men repent. The Savior compels us to. We have also been directed to command all God’s people “on the basis of their holy standing before God” (p 7) to put off the old and put on the new.

Understanding the struggle our people face will remove any unrealistic expectations we may have about the level of their sanctification. At the same time, we will not minimize the holy standards the Lord has set for his purchased people (p 8).

Pastors are Bible men who listen to the Word of God as they “take God’s people through the cycle of repentance” along with themselves (pp 7-8).

Pastors are Bible men who listen to the Word of God as they “approach God’s people evangelically” (pp 8-10). Pastors are Bible men who occupy themselves in Word and sacrament ministry for the benefit of their congregation. Thanks to the essayist we heard the same imperatives two first century pastors heard from Saint Paul: “command” (1 Tim 1), “point out...watch closely...persevere” (1 Tim 4), “exhort” (1 Tim 5), “testify” (2 Tim 1), “show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech” (Titus 2). Carrying out holy pastoral imperatives makes us busy men who nevertheless regain strength and endurance and spiritual health from the same Bread of Life we are feeding to our congregations.

Pastors are Bible men who preach the Word as the apostles preached. When we lose sight of how the Holy Spirit unleashes his life-giving power through the proclamation of the Word, we are wise to study that collection of sermons called the Book of Acts. Pastors are Bible men who also pray in line with the instructions and promises of Scripture. If I had to choose my favorite part of today’s first essay, it would be pages 12-16. Pastor Kolander had us listening in as Moses, David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah prayed when Congregation Israel was exhibiting signs of sickness. Such heartfelt concern! Such love for souls! Such confidence that the Lord has bound himself to fulfill his promises! As one of God’s Bible men I will pray such prayers for his congregation today. You have been invited and urged to do so as well.

I have not read the two upcoming essays. Judging from the assigned topics, I foresee an honest appraisal of the current situation in our congregations and the culture in which they function. I anticipate proposals for methodology that may differ from what we were witnessing in our circles a generation ago. Such considerations too will be a blessing of this symposium. But I look forward to seeing how two other Bible men trained at this seminary begin and end where our first essayist began and ended: thanking the Father for having chosen so many from eternity to be his righteous ones for eternity, celebrating the fellowship the Holy Spirit

creates and the abundant fruit he produces in our congregations, praising the Son of God for having called Bible men to be shepherds of the flock he has purchased with his blood.

God's Bible men have been thoroughly equipped to help God's people grow in faith and love.