

# 20 State of the 24 Church Report

*Reclaiming Lost Things:  
Taking Back What the Church Has Given Up*



American  
Pastors Network



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## INTRODUCTION: A STORY OF LOST THINGS

Near the end of the book of 1 Samuel, there is a sobering story of loss and reclamation. In 1 Samuel 30, we see that David traveled north from Ziklag to partner with the Philistines. They ultimately rejected David's offer, yet while he was pursuing that alliance, a terrible event took place back home. The Amalekites invaded Ziklag, ravaged all of the Jews and took everything. Not just goods and material possessions, they took every woman and child, including David's wives and kids. As David and his army returned to Ziklag, from a distance he saw the smoke rising and arrived to see that everything was lost. The text says **"Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep."** All was lost.

At this point, David had nothing more to support him. No one in Israel could help him. The Philistines didn't want him. His family was gone; all he owned was gone. Even his friends turned against him **as the people spoke of stoning him**. All of his support was gone, *except the LORD*. That is a *good* place, not a bad place, to be in. But now David had to decide how he would reclaim what he had lost.

The story is very dramatic. First, David approached the Lord God and inquired what to do. As God directed, he summoned 600 men to begin the pursuit of the Amalekites. Interestingly, 200 began to get weak and faint. They were left behind at Besor. Their task was to protect the supplies, and we will consider them later. Along the way they find an Egyptian, to whom they show kindness, and he informs them of where the enemy is camped and how to get back what is theirs. It seems as if God provided a foreigner who would help them.

David attacked at night and struck down all but 400 Amalekites who ran for the hills. David rescued his wives, children and all that was Israel's, plus all the spoils of war. When they returned home, they came to the 200 men in Besor. Many of the warriors were disgruntled that those who did not fight would be rewarded with the spoils of war. Yet David not only returned what belonged to them, in an act of generosity, and as a model for the nation, he gave them a portion of the bounty. You see, David realized that God had graciously allowed him to reclaim what was lost and he did not want to hold back a blessing from others.

This story of reclaiming lost things starts out painfully and ends quite powerfully. But do not miss out on some very important insights. David had left his homebase vulnerable trying to build alliances with the wicked Philistines. Sure, it is a good thing to be friendly and strive for harmony, but his intended "partnership" with those who did not love Jehovah and ultimately wanted to destroy them was a mistake and left them open prey for the Amalekites. I see that today in the Church and throughout Christianity. We are pursuing things that seem good, strategic and perhaps beneficial in the short term, yet in the end it is a pragmatic partnership with the world and leaves our families, kids, ministries and the gospel message vulnerable to compromise, confusion and corruption.

Secondly, David at first thought all was lost and faced total despair and hopelessness until he regained his strength from the Lord. He took steps to come before the Lord in repentance, humble adoration and inclined his ear to the Lord God. Coming to a place of acknowledging failure, loss and despair is not a bad thing. David was familiar with that place many times in his life. All the way back to facing Goliath, while sheep herding and encountering a lion or other predators, and in many of the battles he fought being outnumbered but not "out

faithed." As Steve Green penned in the song, "Hidden Valleys' ... *"desperation makes the heart grow."* So, it was again, for the future monarch of Israel. Desperation led him to cry out to the Lord God and seek His deliverance and help.

When David started his pursuit of lost things, he has to cull his army because of fatigue and faintheartedness. He does not worry that the army is weakened nor does he show anger or disappointment at his fellow soldiers. He allows them to stay behind and keeps moving forward. David knew that with God leading, empowering and providing, he did not need an army of men, he had the God of the universe on his side. Again, the church has become so dependent on our human efforts, schemes and plans that we do not walk in the supernatural confidence of God. This is why the absence of meaningful and specific prayer in many churches is so debilitating. We are literally "walking BY sight and not by faith." The direct opposite is what we long to see and it is why we are not positioned to reclaim lost things. David was walking by faith and kept moving forward.

He also had some help along the way. God sent him an Egyptian, who had been among the enemy and had unique knowledge that needed to be leveraged. Interestingly, he admits that he was among those who had pillaged and destroyed Ziklag. He was one of the kidnappers of David's and the others' families. However, David did not seek revenge. He showed kindness, care and gleaned important information for future use in his pursuit of redeeming what was lost. Please note, he did not become partners or give the stranger any power. They were grateful and showed gratitude for the important information the Egyptian provided. Both are virtuous and necessary. However, David never relinquished his authority or handed over position. Too many churches today surrender standing and position and compromise their beliefs thinking it will help them gain back their lost things. Look, you do not need to become an "Egyptian" to have effectiveness in the battle. Learn from them. Listen to their testimony. Become wise with what they are sharing. But do not become like them or hand over your identity to "Egypt."

David arrives upon the enemy. He goes in with precision and power and destroys them. Many flee and David lets them go, for now. In an act of God, David finds EVERYTHING they had lost. He recovers it all. Plus, he is able to take all that the Amalekites had as well and profits from it. As mentioned before, he divides the spoils among all of Israel and anyone who supported the efforts in an act of thanksgiving. David also acknowledges that of all he lost, it was his wives and kids and the people whom he loved dearly that was most important to his heart. God restored it all.

If we in the evangelical church would step back and be honest, the world and our spiritual enemies have overtaken us in the past number of years and have taken much that we hold dear. Statistics on young people leaving the church is shocking and sobering. Standing in the world has been greatly diminished. We have little to no authority to speak, because we have handed over the authority that was given to us through God's Word through our sloppy handling of the Scriptures and our cowardice to boldly proclaim its truth. Marriage is not sacred and we divorce each other at the same rate as the unbelieving unions. And all of this has occurred while leaders and members alike have been pursuing partnerships with the world and alliances in hopes of finding favor from the enemies who want to destroy us. Instead of confronting them with their need for a Savior, we look to find relevance and acceptance from them. We open our membership to those living in ungodly partnerships, practicing same sex relationships, opting for abortion without shame and plunging in all kinds of vices without

fear of losing our witness. We want the world to validate our message and ministry, instead of embracing our validation from the Lord God, even if that is an offense to the watching world. In the end, we return to our camps with neither acceptance from the world and discover the church burning and in rubble and our most precious possessions carted off by the opposition. We are living in a day of lost things.

I know that sounds harsh and puts condemnation upon the church. It could leave us languishing in depression and despair at times. How did the church of the Lord Jesus allow this to happen? How did I personally contribute to its downfall? Is there any hope of a turn around? Much like David, there needs to be a humbling and repentance, and looking to the Lord to help us RECLAIM LOST THINGS! That is where the church is this year. We find much of the church burning and in rubble, with much of our precious resources and valuables lost. Yet all is not lost! We still have the sovereign God on the throne desiring to ignite our hearts and send us into battle to reclaim the lost things.

A theme that the *AMERICAN PASTOR NETWORK* has proclaimed consistently and loudly for the past 3-4 years is the need to **RETURN TO GOD**. It has been a call to repentance, a call to revival and a call to restore the foundations of our relationship with God as the sole power needed to rescue our nation and the church. In 1 Samuel 30, it was David's first step to recovery – he returned to God! We will discuss many observations and solutions through this annual paper, but is important to state that without a wholehearted personal and corporate evaluation leading to cleansing and renewal to the Lord and His Word, we will be spinning our wheels in our efforts to reclaim what we have lost and potentially make major gains for the Kingdom agenda. We would be mistaken to think that acting on some of our suggestions for change would be some kind of magic formula for success without a return to God. May it never be! Everything starts with humbling ourselves and crying out to the Lord God and returning to Him.

I want to encourage every pastor and church leader reading this report to plan now to have a special day on your church calendar this year, to address this *“Return to God”* issue. We have for a number of years encouraged pastors to plan a Sunday early in the calendar year to call the church to reflect, repent and renew. This coming year, Sunday, February 2nd, 2025, is **RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY**. Our theme is, *“When Jesus is Speaking to His Church.”* We will be providing resources based on Revelation 2-3 to support the theme. There will be a sample sermon, a follow up devotional guide and a suggested outline to hold a special night of prayer for your church to unite around the idea of a return to God. We hope you will take steps to participate.

(Learn more at [www.LetterfromGod.org](http://www.LetterfromGod.org))

With that as a backdrop, and from the research we do on the state of the church, we want to outline ten major items that we are calling on the church to consider and take steps to reclaim in the coming year. Many of these things were lost over years and will take time to be re-established. Yet we must start out on the journey now. No delay. No procrastinating. At the end, I will have some specific suggestions for pastors in regard to preaching and teaching and programmatic ideas to help you move forward. As sad as things may look today, our belief is that God can give us the insight, wisdom, power and favor to reclaim lost things and advance the church. Jesus made it clear that *“He is building His Church”!* We are workers in the vineyard and co-laborers in the building project. The work is hard. It is a battle. Let's go and pursue the lost things that God directs us to reclaim for His glory and our good!



# RECLAIMING WHAT WAS LOST

## RECLAIMING PRAYER IN THE CHURCH

I spend a lot of time visiting churches and observing church programming. Some of what I see is subtle and if I were not looking for it I might have missed it. But there is an obvious missing piece in many church diets and it is meaningful, specific, concerted prayer as a congregation. Now if I asked pastors what they are doing in regard to prayer in their ministry they might say that they have small groups or even an occasional prayer night. But I want to challenge pastors and churches that if we are going to reclaim the lost importance of prayer, we need to start with the most important gathering in our church's life and that is on a SUNDAY or WEEKEND WORSHIP GATHERINGS. Sunday is the most important program on the calendar. Most of your effort, most of your talent, and most of the time of preparation each week is given to this major gathering. If prayer is going to be regained, churches must make MUCH ABOUT PRAYER in the Sunday service. You need to intentionally use your spiritual leaders and most spiritually mature members leading the church in prayer to raise the standard of prayer and serve as models for the church. Although I appreciate the musical talent of some of the people leading worship, most are spiritual infants and listening to their prayers is evidence of their immaturity.

We need to get back to a "pastoral prayer" model. A time of intercession for the church, where you are mentioning actual people's names and specific concerns to your fellowship. When you begin to highlight prayer again on Sunday morning, your people will begin to understand that it is important to the leaders. Then, plan ways to insert more targeted and creative prayer activities in your programming: special nights of prayer, weeks of prayer, 21 days of fasting and even launching a Sunday morning prayer team meeting during the service akin to Moody's "boiler room" prayer meeting. If you do not know what that is, you have proven the point that we are void of understanding the power of prayer in the church! Let's make prayer great again in the church!

## RECLAIMING AUTHORITY AND DOCTRINAL CLARITY

Title, position, size and celebrity status of its pastor does not give the church and its leaders authority and influence. Our influence is the Word of God and how we accurately and consistently communicate it to the people we have been entrusted with to lead. Some 20 years ago, the pulpits of America traded theologically and doctrinally focused preaching with creative, humorous, relevant and overly practical or applicational sermons. What truly empowers God's people is not how enamored they are with the preacher, but that they know and can handle the Word of God like the preacher does! Not only have we noticed a diluted pulpit, but throughout the church we see a lack of theologically robust teaching and learning.

As we talk with church leaders about what they offer their flocks in regard to discipleship, Bible teaching and equipping outside of Sunday sermons, we are shocked to find it anemic and lackluster at best. If they do offer a small group experience, many have its leaders discuss the sermon and provide them with a set of questions, again focused on application. The reason this method is deployed is because most small group leaders have not been trained or challenged in their own doctrinal growth. Genuine training of these frontline leaders and

teachers must become a focus of a pastor, thus fulfilling Ephesians 4:11 of "equipping the saints to do the work of ministry." There is little in depth doctrinal learning and a resistance to challenging believers to a deeper, more orderly serious study of the Scriptures. Over the last two years, I have been teaching an overview of each book of the Bible. It has been a rich and dogged task, but the fruit in people's lives is amazing. Many say that they NEVER took time to consider each of the 66 books. Likewise, I developed a simple eight-week study of major doctrinal issues (The Bible, God the Father, The Son, The Spirit, Salvation, End Times, etc) and received the same positive and enthusiastic response. The church is longing to be taught. God's people want to have confidence in the Lord and in their faith and they will only gain a strong footing if they truly know the Word of God. Theology means the "study of God." Every Christian should strive to become a "theologian" and church leaders should be doing everything to help them reach that goal. We need to regain doctrinal learning that has been lost these last few decades.

## RECLAIMING THE ESTABLISHING PROCESS OF DISCIPLESHIP

One of our regular guests on STAND IN THE GAP TODAY, our radio program, is cultural researcher George Barna. He has done some amazing research on the issue of what a genuine DISCIPLE is. One of the things George has stated is that at the very core of what it means to be a follower of Christ is to think, act and live LIKE CHRIST. I know that it sounds like he is stating the obvious, but it really is essential and a missing piece in most discipleship today. Barna has concluded that the reason why we fail at growing up disciples, who actually look like our Lord, is that we have not embraced a BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW. It is the Biblical Worldview that influences our choices, relationships, values and priorities. The great evidence of this lack of genuine discipleship in the evangelical community is how rapidly we are losing our young adults. A tremendous percentage of students who are GUBAs – aka "grown up born agains" – have failed to actually train their minds to think Biblically and therefore they don't know how to think like Christ.

Barna and others, concerned with this failing discipleship model throughout Christianity, point to the fact that we are not getting believers to actually grapple with truth, learn how to answer questions and defend their faith. We might "teach" them didactically and try to force rote information into their memory banks, yet we come up short of having them enter into Socratic discussions and even question their faith, while still in a safe environment. The first time most of young people have their faith tested is in the first semester of any college class and they are ill-prepared to handle it. Or they are challenged on why those having gender confusion are not in error with God's design for the sexes, for example. We must become self-reflective in the way we measure and conclude the making of real disciples and make needed changes before we lose an entire generation of believers.

## RECLAIMING ISSUES OF THE CULTURE AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

We have just concluded one of the longest and most contested presidential elections in US history. You do not need to be a political pundit to recognize that the country is strongly divided. Even though Donald Trump was victorious and he did remarkably win the nationwide popular vote, we must understand that the breach in politics is still deep and wide. As we do an election cycle autopsy we can make two very interesting observations

First, I can attest, after 40 years of pastoral ministry and being quite active politically all those years, that this year I saw more organized and executed prayer efforts related to the elections. Every day I would receive emails and texts reminding me of ways to pray for the nation and all candidates. I have been leading a weekly zoom call with dozens of people of faith burdened for our country. I lost count on how many different special prayer gatherings I was invited to, in person and online, in the final week of the campaign. It was amazing and heartwarming. People of faith, crying out to the Lord, with a deeply held burden for the future governance of America. No matter how the elections ended, whether for your preferred candidate or not, as a believer you should be encouraged.

My second observation goes along with the first, but almost in the opposite direction. As impassioned as an assortment of people of faith were to engage politically, PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS were strangely absent from inserting themselves into the political discussion. I know, as with my prayer call, there were only 3-4 pastors who availed themselves of the opportunity, even though dozens were invited to participate. I only know of a few pastors who took time to address the issues voters were facing that specifically and directly connected to Biblical concerns. I am not measuring their involvement on whether they “endorsed” a candidate. I would have appreciated any mention of clearly Biblical issues like abortion, debt, immigration, transgender issues, etc. Pastors were silent.

It seems that there continues to be an underlying fear of addressing issues, thinking it will split their congregations and ultimately lose some attenders. Maybe they would be concerned about seeming to support one party, just because of the reality that many (but not all) of the cultural issues affirmed in the Scriptures would tend to support one side of the ballot. Maybe pastors did not know how to grapple through the issues as well, like personality failures of the candidates. Some chose to avoid the election issues thinking that pastors and the church need to remain separated from the “things of the world.” I would challenge that thinking, and again, we see a lack of understanding of the importance of Biblical Worldview which influences our decisions on earth even though we are bound for heaven!

We also have found evidence that many organizations speaking into the life of pastors have exchanged preaching the whole council of God with just emphasizing “voter registration” drives as their needed involvement. Pastors need to speak boldly from the pulpit what God’s Word makes clear. It is our belief that this self-imposed silence and avoidance of political and cultural issues is hurting the church and not making things better but causing more division and disunity. Historically, pulpits have played an important role in shaping the hearts and minds of the citizenry of any country. We hold dual citizenship and need to influence the one we are living in, until the day the Lord calls us home to that future City!

Some might think that since Trump has won, we now have a reprieve from having to deal with it. Let me remind you that the day following Election Day, preparations for the next elections began. I would strongly encourage each pastor to take their church through a “election reflection” focused on what we learned, what was difficult, what our future approach should be and how we can prepare better for the 2026 mid-term elections and then the 2028 Presidential election year.

## RECLAIMING OUR CHILDREN AND THEIR EDUCATION

One of the clearly “lost” areas of our lives has been our children’s education. Going all the way back to the early 1960’s, we can see a systematic, methodical attempt by the progressive element in this country to corrupt our youth. From removing prayer and Bible reading, and then getting more aggressive, where today’s teachers are guiding our kids to consider gender transitioning, the classroom is the battleground. Even more sinister is that the government, in collusion with teachers’ unions, have written laws stripping parental rights. This past year, California passed a law making it illegal for a parent to question their child’s gender confusion and challenging teachers. We have seen Title IX, which was designed to protect women’s sports, being re-written to focus on girls accepting boys playing in their sports and if they protest, it’s seen as discrimination against the trans athlete. As John MacArthur wrote this year, there is a “war against our children.”

Parents must get more and more involved with their children’s education, as long as the school district they attend will respect that involvement. Parents must never assume that their kid’s teacher have their best interest in mind and will not wrongly influence their students away from the parent’s beliefs and values. And if their school will not respect and cooperate, then parents will need to find suitable alternatives to public education. We already know that a government run institution will never hold up the values related to a Biblical worldview and so you will always be fighting against the current. Whether it’s Christian schools or home schooling, parents have some very difficult and costly decisions to make. Nevertheless, we can share with you that many Christian schools are not fully embracing a Biblical worldview approach to education. It is not true “Christian” education but just Christians involved with education. There is a difference. Here is where the church must get involved.

Parents and families will need counsel, support and maybe assistance as they navigate the turmoil of educational choices. Home schooling co-ops should be considered and churches should open their doors to these groups. Pastors need to know and introduce themselves to local Christian schools and make sure they can properly offer good and factual counsel about the various Christian school models available. These are difficult days to be a parent and the church must step up and help parents figure out how to protect and preserve their children’s hearts and minds. I do believe that this lost thing could be reclaimed with a combined effort of home and church!

## RECLAIMING PASTORAL PROTOCOL AND EXAMPLE

One of the lost things that most laypeople will not notice is how ministers of the gospel conduct themselves and the way in which they are executing their calling. I guess that is the first place I want to start – the call to ministry. I am not one who believes in a mystic calling of a servant of God. I am more of a “confirmation” guy

when it comes to who should be a pastor. God begins to stir your heart, you start putting your toe in the waters of ministry, you have some identifiable fruit and success, you grow in your knowledge and competency and then those leaders and fellow believers who have observed this “working out your calling,” confirm that you should be a pastor. Nevertheless, in the past few years I have noticed this idea of being a pastor is more like choosing any other profession. You enjoy elements of the job and maybe have a good experience and you go to Bible college or seminary and all of a sudden you are a “self-appointed” minister.

I remember hearing some sage say that “if you believe you should be in ministry, then you must believe that there is nothing else you should or can do!” When I began to have a sense of God’s call on my life, my father insisted that I turn over my insurance licenses. His reasoning was that he believed ministry would be hard and if I had an “escape route” I might take it! Really good wisdom! We need to reclaim the uniqueness and exclusivity of being a minister of the gospel. Not just anyone can be a pastor; not everyone should desire it or pursue it and there should be a strong sense of calling that drives one into that role. Along with raising the uniqueness of being a pastor, should come a commitment that if you are in that role you are to be an exemplary model for how we are to live: your priorities, your sacrifices and the things you are willing to forgo to be a ministry leader. In recent years, the behavior, conduct and lifestyle of ministers is not what I would called being, “set apart,” for the work of the gospel. Set apart means to be separated or not entangled with the daily business of life. Paul admonished Timothy about the kind of example he needed to be in Ephesus. I know we want to relate with the sheep and be “one of the guys,” but they look to us and get “signals” from us on how we are to live.

About a decade ago, I had a wealthy uncle who passed away and he had a number of vehicles. One of them was a very expensive, luxury SUV. My cousin knew I needed a car and offered it to me at an unbelievable price. Practically and economically it was a great deal and a “no brainer.” Before deciding, during an Elder meeting, I mentioned the possibility of getting the car. No one said “no,” but you could tell by their facial expressions, they were uncomfortable. I went home and said, “thanks but no thanks” to my cousin. When I reported back to the Elders my decision, a number of them thanked me and told me how glad they were. They believed that many in our church would have struggled with “their pastor driving such an opulent vehicle.” I know that seems silly and in Christ we are free to live as long as we are not sinning. But as a pastor we must regain the protocols needed to garner the respect and example our people need us to be.

## RECLAIMING HIGHER EDUCATION

Again, this lost thing may not be on most Christian’s radar, but there is a growing crisis among Christian Higher education. Over the last year, dozens of long standing institutions have closed their doors. The primary reason for this downfall is financial pressures and mismanagement budgetarily. But also, there is a noticeable drift of mission and theology throughout the academic world. This past year, I had the privilege to interview on STAND IN THE GAP TODAY, a college president who has been a veteran of higher education for the past four decades. He has literally seen it all and been involved personally with many of the failing schools. His insights were mind-blowing. He is sending out a warning to colleges across the nation of the pending problems facing colleges and seminaries.

Why is this a concern for the church? Again, pastors will be asked by parents to suggest or recommend Christians colleges and universities and we need to know which ones are Biblical as well as financially and academically healthy. My guess suggests that parents ask during the discovery process what the debt ratio of the college is. Who would ever think that would be a viable concern for the selection of a college, but it is in this environment. Another iceberg, under the surface, wrecking colleges is accreditation. Self-governing accreditation organizations are thrusting unbiblical expectations on evangelical colleges such as transgender issues or unbiblical lifestyle expectations. One college had to drop an entire program because they could not keep their specific certification. It was costly, with the loss of students and having to let go long-time faculty.

The second concern that churches need to understand with this Christian college crisis is that future ministers and gospel workers will be limited. If we are relying on these institutions to assist in preparing future pastors, missionaries, counselors and other ministry roles and they are no longer available or the cost is unreachable, the pool of available workers will begin to evaporate. We need to connect with Christian colleges nearest to our church, assess their health and finds ways to help them practically.

## RECLAIMING MEN AND BIBLICAL MASCULINITY

I have been involved with the evangelical church for 65 years, and with confidence I can say that never in all those years have men of the church been more involved or had a greater presence than their female counterparts. The church has always been dominated by the ladies when it comes to interest, involvement, serving and engagement. There just seems to be a greater ease for women to be a part of the church life. There have been moments over the past 40 years when I have seen the men grow in their interest and start showing leadership in the church. Specifically, in the 1990’s, mostly ignited by the popularity of the PROMISEKEEPER movement. Coach McCartney filled up football stadiums with men across the country which served as a catalyst for men’s ministry in the church to be launched. Yet, like anything, once PK closed its doors, in a few years, men’s ministries faded. However, in the past ten years, we have seen a greater concern regarding the void of men’s leadership in the church. There is a growing acceptance of women in church leadership as Pastors, Elders and other governing roles.

This growing acceptance is not just in the mainline churches, which has been there for decades. But now in some “conservative” and “evangelical” churches, this opening the door to women in leadership is rampant. This comes from a lack of theological clarity, but also is driven by the pragmatic response that if men are not interested in leading in the church, the ladies are and so let them do it! It is a combination of theological failure and pragmatism with the overall loss of masculinity in the world. Men have been feminized in the culture. Masculinity has been demonized in the culture. Masculinity has been seen as an evil to be neutralized. This incendiary attitude towards men in the world has driven men underground and they are fearful of showing any assertion to lead. The church must correct this fraudulent teaching and reverse the destructive attitude towards men. Now, to be fair, men need to step up and take responsibility and start living a godly, respectable life. First in their homes, and then in the church and finally throughout their community. Pastors should be doing everything they can to encourage men and equip them to be a spiritual success and to reclaim their rightful place as loving, God-fearing leaders.

## RECLAIMING THE SENIORS

For years American Pastors Network (APN) has been greatly concerned with seeing intergenerational connections take place in the Christian community. Although it has been spoken often among our national leaders, we have seen a wider gap occur and an alienating of the older generation. This past year, during one of my PASTOR 2 PASTOR podcasts, I discussed how hurt and angry many senior saints in churches feel towards their church leaders and the younger generation. I laid out the fact that a number of years ago, churches approached the older generation and told them that the church had to change some of the ways it does ministry; its music, its programming and its style of church needed to change and it would be very different from what they were used to. They appealed to their maturity to accept the changes and also promised them all kinds of wonderful things ahead. Well, years have passed and the things promised have not materialized. The older saints are disappointed and unsatisfied and the way they view it, they continue to be asked to pay for the ministry, being the primary giving base.

Seniors are disillusioned with church and are beginning to check out. Many of them are finding parachurch ministries to serve in and they are starting to divert their giving to other charities. But even more devastating is that all the maturity and wisdom that they could be passing along to the next generation is being lost. We have separated age groups and so the younger generation rarely engages with the older and we are seeing the folly of that “silo” programming. An intentional and aggressive effort needs to be made by churches to elevate and reclaim the seniors that may still be in their churches. They must also recognize that there are many senior saints looking to invest the life they have left for kingdom impact. We need to honor the “gray heads” as the Psalmist encourages us to do!

## RECLAIMING END TIMES TEACHING

I purposefully saved this lost item for the last one because I did not want you to check out and stop reading. I say that because as I have discussed this need in today’s church, pastors turn off and avoid the topic. Partly because it does take real work to actually teach on the subject. Plus, many of those who focus on end times are either speculating or sensationalists. I am advocating for Biblical teaching and for pastors to develop their convictions and state it. I know that there are a number of views and as a ministry we are most definitely in one camp and very convinced of that. However, the entire subject of the return of Christ, the future difficulties ahead and the importance of Christians being prepared for what lies ahead is crucial.

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians in a major passage on the Second Coming of Christ, that we were to “encourage one another” with these things. When a church has a comprehensive and KNOWN doctrinal position on future things, it is motivated to reach the lost; they have unusual confidence in God and His will and they live with an awareness that they may be face to face with Christ at any moment, producing holy living. Because of the controversial nature of the topic and the avoidance of potential conflict, pastors and churches have lost their way when it comes to the end times. We are appealing to the church to start to reclaim this lost thing. Start discussing what the Bible teaches about Christ’s return and why it is important.



# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

It is one thing to identify what is wrong - most Monday morning quarterbacks can spout off why their team lost the day before. But we want to also provide some solutions to where we believe the church is at as we near the end of 2024 and look to move into a new ministry year. Based on our observations on the many “lost things” throughout the evangelical community, we have some specific things we would encourage every pastor and church leadership to prayerfully consider. We understand that every church is unique and facing specific issues related to their relationships, region and state of ministry. Yet we are confident that many of the things mentioned in this report are relatable to your particular fellowship and if not now, then you will be seeing them on the horizon in the future. So here are some things we would suggest you start to implement:

## 01 START WITH PRAYER

When David realized that he had lost everything, his desperation drove him to seek the Lord. Maybe the real issue is that you do not see the concerns that we do as we examine the landscape of the church. Yet if three or four or seven of these issues are bubbling up around your church family, then it should drive you to your knees and motivate you to get your church praying for God’s direction and help.

In a moment of self-promotion, I would ask you to consider having a RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY. We are targeting Sunday, February 2nd in the new year, but you can do it when it fits into your schedule. The goal is to awaken the church and drive them back to God as being their sole source of help. Then follow up with a renewed commitment to pray diligently and intentionally each week as you gather together!

## 02 REVIEW YOUR METHOD OF DISCIPLESHIP AND BEGIN TO INTRODUCE SOME BIBLICALLY DEEPER TEACHING.

You may have a Sunday School class system or offer small groups or have men’s and women’s ministries as the main means to grow disciples. Whichever you have chosen as the source for maturing your flock, take a hard look at what you are doing and the fruit it is actually producing. Can I please appeal to you to think hard and soberly about only offering “sermon discussion groups” as your means of discipling.

It might be a good “first step” but your people need more! I could easily suggest 4-5 different curriculum and possible directions to contemplate. But whatever you decide, it needs to expect people to “study to show themselves approved.” Your teenagers are being challenged in school to learn a foreign language and even write computer code by the 10th grade. We should be challenging young people and older believers to get serious about their faith and Biblical knowledge!

## 03 Begin to focus on the men of your church and provide equipping that encourages them to lead in a godly manner.

As a pastor, there were a few things that I never surrendered to other pastors or leaders. One was the prayer effort in the church. Second was “on boarding” new people and teaching the discovery class to

those joining our fellowship. Third was teaching and discipling men. For 20 years as a senior pastor, and even as an assistant pastor, I led men’s groups throughout the year; sometimes two a week - one group early in the morning during a weekday and another, every other week at night. It was during those times that I was able to personally, spiritually

and Biblically leave a mark, or better, an imprint on the lion share of men in the church. As years went by, the accumulative nature of that effort gave us a plethora of men available to serve as Elders, Deacons, small group leaders and ultimately, pastors. We staged nights of prayer and worship for our men called MEN’S CONVOCATION. It was amazing to watch men sing at those events and be mute on a Sunday morning. I would scratch my head, but then I realized that men

love to grow with men. Husbands were more loving to their wives; kids had better dads; employers thanked me for growing up faithful employees. When you unlock the men of your church, your church will soar! It is why Malachi told the people of Jerusalem, “turn the hearts of the FATHERS back to their children...” It was a prophetic reality that I have seen over and over! We must take back what we have lost when it comes to our men in the church!

## 04 Stage a meeting with your seniors on a quarterly basis to hear their concerns and encourage their involvement.

Plan a lunch with all your seniors with one objective for the pastor and its church leaders to LISTEN TO THEM. You will be surprised how many show up and what you will hear. Sure, there will be those who are complainers and cantankerous - that is standard fare for getting old. But you will also hear their heart, their love for Jesus, their burden for your young people, maybe even their grief over the condition of the

church. Then ask them to become your prayer warriors for renewal and revival. I am convinced that you will walk away with insights and also encouraged knowing that you have these mature, faithful saints holding you up. Just one additional observation: during COVID, most pastors told me that even though seniors were the most susceptible to being really affected by the virus, it was the seniors who were most dedicated and complained the most when churches shut down their ministries. These saints have resilient faith. They are built like battleships and we need them!

## 05 Consider building a preaching calendar that will address a number of these concerns.

I am not one to tell pastors what they should preach on or subscribe to a lexicon of sermons, but there are a few suggestions that we can make for you to think about preaching on this coming year. I think 1 Peter is a great starting point. Peter is addressing exiles who have been displaced from familiar surroundings and are trying to learn how to live out their faith in enemy territory. It touches on so many of the issues we have discussed. Similarly, in the Old Testament, would be the book of Malachi. The prophet was sent to confront the Jews who had returned from exile and had become sloppy about their commitment to Jehovah. He calls them to examine their hearts and recognize that God is “holding some things against them.” To ignite your prayer life, why not develop a series of

messages on prayer? I have taught through the Lord’s Prayer and also looked at how Christ made prayer an important part of modeling for His disciples. This past year I preached on a series of messages I called, “Great Prayers in the Bible,” examining actual prayers prayed by God’s servants. Nehemiah, Abraham, Jonah, Paul and others have entire prayers recorded in the Scriptures. The last two suggestions: Titus is fantastic when dealing with church polity issues, especially the role of women and making sure you have good order in the church. We tend not to teach on ecclesiology and we really need to do that regularly. Finally, as part of the RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY, preach through the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. It serves as a tool to measure where your church is at and where it DOES NOT want to go!



**06 Commission either your children's or youth pastor, christian education committee or empower a task force to study the educational options for your families and how the church can respond to and support those decisions.**

You can be a tremendous resource for the families of your church if you could have accurate information about Christian school options and home school resources. Also, as I recommended in last year's STATE OF THE CHURCH REPORT, make sure you are connected with the organizations that are working to

**07 Plan a weekend prophecy conference.**

I am not suggesting that you do the teaching, but find a credible and capable guest and bring them in for a number of days and ask your church to commit to it. As a pastor, every other summer, I brought in a prophecy expert and staged a four day conference starting on a Sunday and running through Wednesday. I usually combined it with a mini-VBS for the kids and our people really appreciated it. Plus, I had the opportunity to be taught and encouraged.

**08 Lead your leadership team through a study of some of the cultural "hot buttons" and set a goal of preparing positions papers to present to the church body this year.**

Without being "political," you can help yourself by speaking from the Bible on these potentially divisive issues and also gain oneness throughout the leadership. Whenever election time rolls around you will have much of the work done and just remind your church how they should vote their values and

change and reform the public school. This past year I have had a number of conversations with the Mom's for Liberty group. They are doing a great job holding public schools accountable and helping parents have a voice. As a matter of fact, when it comes to the recent Title IX situation, Mom's for Liberty were a part of the nationwide lawsuit and they won! If you are a member of MFL, you and your child are exempt from the new federal guidelines. Be a help to parents and they will love your church!

It also served the evangelical community in our county and I had many from other churches attend. I saw a need that other churches were lacking and was able to help those believers longing to learn. APN is discussing the possibility of staging regional prophecy conferences and using some of the excellent prophecy teachers featured on our radio program. Keep an eye out for that and certainly reach out to us if that is something you would be interested in being a part of.

beliefs. I have found that dealing with issues before you are forced to deal with them, always brings about a better result and guards the unity. You should never speak about church discipline when a leader is being dismissed for immorality. You should never speak about giving when in the middle of a capital campaign. We can and should anticipate these issues as leaders and plan pre-emptive teaching and equipping for the congregation's health.



## CLOSING THOUGHTS

The mission of the church is fairly simple. We are to proclaim the Gospel accurately and aggressively to as many people as possible. Next, we are to gather believers together and establish a life giving community that strengthens one another and grows future leaders. Finally, we should be involved with the strategic process of multiplying the church, both locally and globally. As concise as this mandate is, the church in 2024 has become distracted and demotivated, primarily because it has allowed the resources and spiritual advantages given to us by God to slip out of our hand.

We have lost ground in the spiritual battle. Evidence is the frightening statistic that for the first time in our nation's history less than half of Americans tell us that they attend church and my guess is that attendance is not regularly or with any kind of fervency. The Church must change course for the sake of Christ, for the future of the next generation and for the souls of many who do not know Christ.

We must dig out of this hole we are in and it starts with pursuing the things we have lost. If we will commit ourselves to that task and focus our individual places of worship and service on the key items conveyed in this report, we are convinced that collectively the evangelical church will move the needle and begin to have a measure of influence in the world again. Today we have been neutered. It is self-inflicted. Yet under the power of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to the Scriptures and by rallying the Saints of God, revival is around the corner and renewal is ahead in the coming years. It is our commitment at the AMERICAN PASTORS NETWORK to continue to bang the drum and challenge pastors and believers alike of the need for the church to rise up again. We pledge you our support. Each week we prepare content that will deliver clarity on topics and issues.

We present an ongoing sense of community with like-minded churches and leaders. We plan creative programs and resources to assist you in bearing lasting fruit. Finally, we believe all of those things should fuel you with the courage to speak up, stand up and look up. May God give you, your fellow-leaders and your church the courage to reclaim the lost things in 2025.



## HOW TO USE THIS REPORT?

Last year, a pastor asked me an interesting question. He stated it this way: “I really appreciate this report and agree with most of what you have reported on, but what should I do with it? How can I use it?” It was a great question because we do not want what we produce to just be *“food for thought, we want it to be FUEL for action!”*

So here are some ideas...

- Pastor or church leaders should take time and read through it thoroughly and make notes reflecting how what is outlined in the SOTC Report relates to your personal church situation. As you do that, it might surface additional things you see you need to work on. Once you are convinced of some of the findings and content you will be able to lead your church and specifically your leaders.
- Plan an extended time to do a deep dive on the report and for you as a pastor or senior leader to methodically work through the report. Obviously, you want to give a copy to each of your board members or key leaders that you assemble for this review, but also assume they will NOT read it thoroughly.
- I would plan an all-day Saturday study day dedicated to this report. View it as “continuing education” for church leaders. In the first session, teach through the introduction and the story of David. Focus on how David felt, the mistakes he made, his initial actions and how God used this to teach him and Israel some valuable lessons.
- The second session, I would dig into the list of “lost things” and allow them to view it as a way to understand what is happening around the church in America. One key for greater learning with your leaders, is to suggest as they work through the section on lost things, that they begin to “form questions.” Not observations, statements or retorts about the things suggested in the report, but questions to probe the information. This is where you can use the Socratic method. As they ask questions, answer them with questions and have them go back and think about what they are asking. Here is an example: let’s say, as they read the issue regarding discipleship and they bring up that your church uses a sermon-based discussion format and ask: “Are we suggesting that we stop using the sermon as a discussion starter in small groups?” Your possible response could be: “Do you believe that using the sermon as the core of our study time is effectively discipling people?” Or maybe, “If we did replace the sermon, what could we do instead of the sermon?” Make them think about why they use the sermon and what the alternatives are. Who knows, you might discover some better means of doing your ministry.
- The final or third session is where you as the senior leader can start to share some vision. Using the solution section, identify the 3-4 things that you would like the leadership to consider that you focus on as a church. Remember the old adage – “do a few things and do them well!” If you attempt to do all of them, it will overwhelm and de-motivate your leaders. It might be obvious as you go through this process what you need to work on. As you share, make sure you identify things that you personally want to work on. Whether it’s a preaching topic or emphasis of ministry, lead the way that you believe some of these things are crucial to address and here is where YOU are going to focus YOUR attention and ministry efforts.
- Make sure you write down what you decide to do and then on a monthly basis, at least for the next THREE MONTHS, review what you are committed to and get a progress report. Also use the phrase “LOST THINGS” when identifying those areas of ministry you are attempting to reclaim.
- Again, here is a shameless promotion: APN and STAND IN THE GAP radio has nearly ten years of archived programming on our app and website. If you have never looked at all we have, you are missing out on a treasure trove of resources and ministry helps. You can search what we have and assign your leaders to listen at their leisure and give them additional equipping and support. And if there are ways that we can assist your church to grow and develop, please do not hesitate to contact our office.

# American Pastors Network



For further research and assistance check out  
[www.AmericanPastorsNetwork.net](http://www.AmericanPastorsNetwork.net) and avail yourself of various  
church-related resources.

**STAND** IN THE **GAP**

**RADIO AND TV**

Check out the vast archived programs from both Stand in the Gap  
Today Radio and TV at [www.StandintheGapMedia.org](http://www.StandintheGapMedia.org). For pastors, our  
PASTOR2PASTOR videos provide on-going training and solutions.