

Then they will **rebuild** the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations, And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations.  
(Isaiah 61:4)

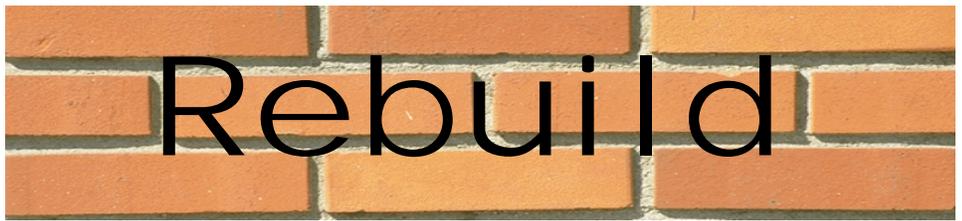
## A Look Under the Surface

The premise behind this slender periodical is that the Church does not just need to be remodeled, but that it must be built again from its foundations.

Someone might read that and object, "Sure, the church could stand some improving, but c'mon, the church is not that bad. Look at all the Christian activity in this country, Christian radio and TV stations, Mega Churches, well funded and focused parachurch ministries, evangelistic crusades that address thousands, and a powerful, conservative Christian presence in Washington politicians. And just look at Church attendance; nearly 50% of all Americans attend church, the highest percentage of any country."

All that sounds good. But does all of this mean that the American Church is a powerful witness for Christ? Pound the hammer harder, and you'll find a hollow core. Consider the following ...

**Christian Presence in America is Lessening, Not Growing:** Church membership has not kept pace with America's growing population. If membership stayed *even* with population growth, we would have twelve million more church members than we do now.<sup>1</sup> In actuality, this decade records a 3% drop in church attendance.<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of the 1990's, the nonchurched population has risen from 25% to 32%, an increase of 60-65 million people.<sup>3</sup> According to Christian social research analyst, George Barna, large scale surveys of the population reveal that of the 267 million in the U.S., 187 million have not come to Christ. If this segment of the population were a nation, it would rank fifth largest in the world.<sup>4</sup> After studying the attitudes of the American people, Barna's sad conclusion is that 'the

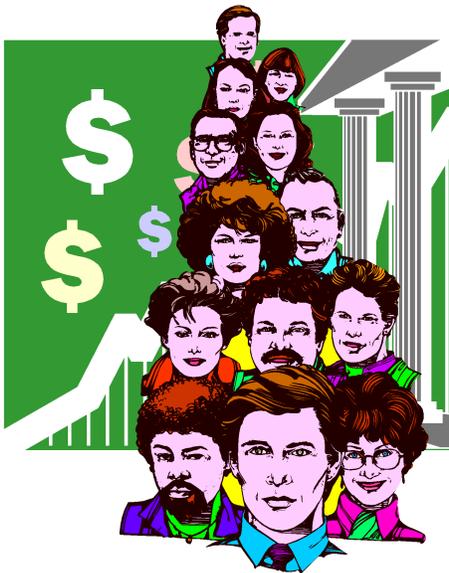


Issue Number 0005

October-1996

## The American Church: A Success? (Part One)

nonchurched people in our nation have rejected the church for the long haul."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that the greatest percentage increase in membership is not in the Christian Church, but within Mormon, Buddhist, and Moslem religious bodies.<sup>6</sup>



**Vanishing Christian Lifestyle:** Research has shown that the most powerful attraction of a nonbeliever to the Gospel is not a sermon, a Christian concert, or any other evangelistic presentation. The unbeliever is most effected by seeing a life changed by Christ. That is the way it should be. Unfortunately, surveys reveal that most Americans "cannot tell a born-again Christian from nonbelievers because there is no difference in the way they live."<sup>7</sup>

Now why is that? It is because Christianity has ceased to be equated with living for Christ, and has been minimized to be just another emotional experience.

Pollster George Gallup's research led him to conclude that there is "little difference in the ethical views and behavior of the churched and the unchurched." He found no substantial difference in the numbers of those who cheated on their taxes, exaggerated their résumés, or called in sick though well.<sup>8</sup> Other findings show that there is no notable distinction between giving patterns; only 25% of evangelicals tithe, and the vast majority who make between 50-75 thousand a year give only 1.5%.

The Roper Organization discovered a similar, but more devastating, finding. In analyzing the difference between how a person lived one's life before and after one became "born again," their data showed that in the three categories analyzed – use of illegal drugs, drunk driving, and marital infidelity—the behavior in each category was worse *after* the born again experience than it was before!<sup>9</sup>

This complements the trend Prison Fellowship and George Barna discovered in their joint study comparing the American Christian population against its non-believing counterpart. Their research showed that the rate of divorce among born-again Christians is now *higher* (30%) than the divorce rate of non-believers (27%).<sup>10</sup> I think it is also noteworthy that the divorce rate among *pastors* is even *higher*, ... and increasing faster than in *any* other profession.<sup>11</sup>

The moral barometer among young "committed" Christians is not encouraging either. *Single Adult Ministries Journal* reported that

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# Christ did not come to get *decisions*. He came to make *disciples*.

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among young singles actively involved in a church, 23% of the men and 14% of the women have been actively involved in sexual relationships within the past 6 months.<sup>12</sup> It is no wonder that many Christian crisis pregnancy centers report that nearly half of their clients do not come from the "street," but from respectable, "bible-believing" churches.

## Not "Decisions"...Discipleship

Some look at results of evangelistic outreaches, and rejoice as they see more Americans making more "decisions." I am reluctant to celebrate their "conversion." The first question I must ask is, "What are these people "deciding" for? If they have decided for anything less than Christ *and* a distinct lifestyle that leads one increasingly closer to Him, I must question whether they have truly received the Gospel. Christ did not come to get "decisions," but to make disciples... those who give themselves "to observe *all*" He commands (Matthew 28:19, 20).

I am convinced by the Bible, personal experience, and observation, that when one gives his or her life to Christ - inclusive of a commitment to live in accountability with other like-minded Christians - that this person's life will be dynamically changed. Of course! How could anyone be truly united to God's Son, and not have a changed life!?

The one who grasps the authentic Gospel will live a life that will expose all earthbound ambitions to be as

valuable as pocket lint. But today's American revision of the Gospel asks people to accept Christ without asking them to make a decision to identify with His life. That is crazy. This re-packaged Gospel will neither revolutionize a life, nor challenge a Christless culture.

Bodies, buildings, and bucks do not make the American Church a success. Biblical success is founded on a *lifestyle of being faithful to God – in word and life*. This will require the Church to provide more than "Gospel presentations," it will require her to provide a relational *environment* that supports and encourages people to live what they say they believe. Only then will the Gospel be seen and experienced as the revelation of God's love and power that it is.

Jordan Bajis

<sup>1</sup> Ken Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect* (Broadman & Holman, TN, 1994), p. 5 <sup>2</sup> Cited in *The Josh McDowell Research Almanac And Statistical Digest*, 1995 Edition, (Julian Press, CA, 1995) p. 388. <sup>3</sup> George Barna, *Evangelism That Works*, (Regal Books, CA, 1995), p. 47 <sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 22 <sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 69 <sup>6</sup> George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle*, (Regal Books, CA, 1990), p. 135; By the year 2,000, Mormons will have 10 million members, and the number of Buddhists, and Moslems will more than double. p. 141 <sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 167 <sup>8</sup> *PRRC Emerging Trends* (December 1983):3-5 cited in Charles Colson, *The Body*, (Word Publishing, Dallas, 1992), p. 31 <sup>9</sup> Drunk driving: 4% before "conversion", 12% after; illegal drug use: 5% before, 9% after; Sex with another besides spouse: 2% before, 5% after. "Study Finds Little Difference in Behavior of Born-Again Christians," *EP News Service*, Sept. 21, 1990, p. 9 <sup>10</sup> *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 19, Number 1, Summer, "Viewpoint: Apologetics for the Church: Why Christians Are Losing the Culture War", Charles Colson, p. 52 <sup>11</sup> Charles Colson, *The Body* (Word Publishing, Dallas, 1992), p. 304 <sup>12</sup> "Comments on Beliefs and Values in Today's Society", *Currents*, 164, 1991, p. 4

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