

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)

Unmistakable Evidences

Last month I reported that despite the books, tele-communications satellites, multiplied ministries, and evangelistic crusades, the witness of the American church is sickly. I am not only referring here to decade-long decreases in Church membership, or the Church's inability to bring people to Christ at a pace that can at least match our meager population growth,¹ or even her failure to increase the Christian presence in the world for the past 100 years).² I am referring to two even more devastating symptoms - the American Christian's failure to see the connection between "receiving Christ" and living a decidedly Christian life-style, and the church's inability to mature the few Christians who do make the connection.

We must face it. This core weakness shows that for all of our preaching and ministry, we may not be promoting the Gospel at all - we may even be *betraying* it!

When Christian social researcher George Barna conducted extensive surveys among people involved in evangelistic work - those you'd think would be on the cutting edge of discipleship - he discovered that *one third* of the "evangelists believed that all that was required to get to heaven was to be a generally 'good person.'" More amazing still is the fact that 40% of these "evangelists" did not even believe it made a difference **what** a person believed!³

A related example of a dizzy double standard was uncovered by Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler when they surveyed more than 3,700 youth from over thirteen evangelical denominations. 57 percent of the evangelical young people said they

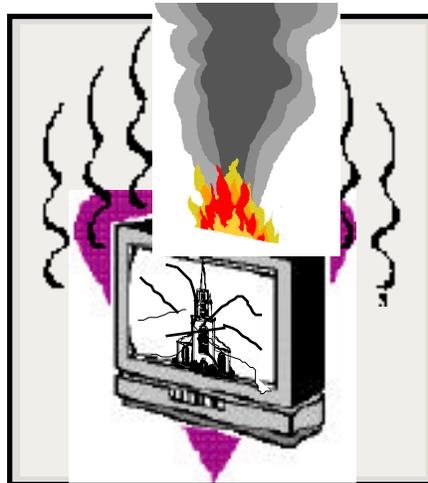
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The American Church: A Success?

(Conclusion)

did not believe in the existence of absolute Truth. Don't dismiss this finding thinking that these kids were "on the fringe." All were "committed Christians" actively involved in churches, two thirds of them having daily prayer times.⁴



The adult generation is in no better shape. In 1991 Barna found that 53% of "Bible-believing, conservative Christians said there is no such thing as absolute truth." That is jaw-dropping. The results of his 1994 follow up study were more shocking: The percentage of people who questioned the existence of truth *had actually grown* to 62% in the three year interval between studies! He discovered that the rate of people adopting a *no-truth* view of life was now actually moving faster among "believers" than in the general population!⁵

Rebuild

Last month I reported how there was little difference between how a professing Christian lived and how a non-believer lived; and where there were differences, the *Christians* were less moral, and less worthy of trust. Now, recent surveys reveal that American Christians do not even know what is true! Are we getting this? Do we understand that our lack of credibility has dug a hole that no thousand sermons can ever fill?

Let's face it. If our "American Gospel" cannot even change those in our pews, how is it going to ever change the world? There is no other way...

The Church has to start *Being* the Gospel she preaches.

A Good Lesson From a Bad TV

I went into the store the other day looking for a TV. I thought I spotted the perfect candidate. It had a decent picture, an attractive case, and the price was right. I asked the salesman his opinion about the model. He did not beat around the bush, cautioning, "Stay away from it! I've had enough experience with those sets to tell you that that company consistently puts out junk."

Now if I were this TV manufacturer, and found out people considered my products junk, I could do one of two things: 1) I could make my product more marketable by lowering price and by countering bad PR with inflated advertising claims, *or* 2) I could improve quality and *then* advertise.

A lower price and a glitzy advertising campaign may get more customers to make "decisions" for the TV at first, but in the long run, the short-life picture tube would have the greater impact. Customers

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would go elsewhere for a TV.

The moral of the story is that people trust what they see for themselves before the "press" they read.

Of course, we are speaking here about something much more important than getting a clear picture of Ophra Winfrey. We are talking about issues that have life and death consequences. If we fail to *be* what we preach, and yet continue to preach as if the distance between the two does not really matter, we discredit the Gospel and nothing, no cheap feeling-based imitation, is going to make up for the lack. If we cannot show the Gospel, people won't buy it no matter what kind of selling strategy we use.

In the first centuries of the Church, when one "accepted Christ," three things stood inseparably together: 1) A commitment to give oneself to obey Christ, first and foremost, 2) Union with a Christian community of people dedicated to love God, one another, and those outside of Christ, and 3) A clear decision to re-orient one's life-style in support of the other two.

To bridge the Grand Canyon-sized credibility gap of the American Church, we must make a resolve to apply three remedies. First, we must recommit ourselves to seeing the Church as the Covenant Community Christ originally intended; a relational environment of Christians committed to God *and* His fellow Covenanters. This is the context

where God's People can get the support and accountability they need to live what they say they believe. Second, we need to simplify our lives so we can have the time to love. Without making love a time priority, it will never be a priority at all. And, third, we must re-establish a pastoral structure that supports and challenges the Christian People to live Christ's *greatest command*, to "love the Lord with heart, soul, mind, and strength."

Truth be told, if we solely focused on this third remedy – Christ's foremost commandment – we will be forced to adopt the other two. And if we did this, more people would not only "accept" Jesus, more people would *live* for Him as well - and this indeed would be Good News for all.

Jordan Bajis

¹ *The Antioch Effect*, Ken Hemphill, (Broadman and Holman, 1994, p. 5. ² The percentage of Christians that make up the world population actually reveals a slight decrease: in 1900 34.4% of the world professed Christianity, today it is now only 33.7%. *The Church Growth Report*, Spring 1996, as reported in *Evangelism* (May 1996, Vol. 10, No. 3). ³ George Barna, *Evangelism That Works*, Regal Books, CA, 1995), p. 142. ⁴ Josh McDowell, Bob Hostetler, *Right From Wrong*, Word Publishing, 1994, p. 8. 84% attended Sunday school *and* youth group at least once a week. ⁵ In 1991, 67% of Americans said they did not believe in an absolute truth; in 1994 the percentage went up to 72% – the rate of change being 5%. Among those considering themselves "born again" Christians, the change toward disbelief in absolute truth rose 9%. *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 19, Number 1, Summer, "Viewpoint: Apologetics for the Church: Why Christians Are Losing the Culture War", Charles Colson, p. 52.

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