



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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The Church -- Progressing With Time?

So how does one overcome being a “normal church” in modern America? One of biggest issues that the modern Church deals with today is how to be a part of the culture where you are located, without losing the unique message of the Gospel that has been entrusted to you by God. That type of problem that is also faced by financial institutions, the military, schools, civic groups and fraternal organizations who try to bring their older values and beliefs into the changing culture of mainstream America. Even our modern, advanced medical community has to deal with these same issues. For example, take a look at this very simplified chart about the development of medical advice given to folks today and how we got there.

2000 B.C. - Here, eat this root.
1000 B.C. That root is ineffective. Here, wear this amulet.
500 A.D. - That amulet is heathen. Here, say this prayer.
1600 A.D. - That prayer is superstition. Here, drink this potion.
1920 A.D. - That potion is snake oil. Here, swallow this pill.
1950 A.D. - That pill is ineffective. Here, take this antibiotic.
2000 A.D. - That antibiotic is artificial. Here, eat this root.

The same thing is happening in the Church. The more the megachurches and beach churches and contemporary churches try to adapt to the constantly changing culture and norms of society, the more the people are rejecting them and walking away from the Church all together. Sure, a lot of those congregations find a certain group that want the kind of worship and doctrines that they have to offer; but the under forty, mainstream America culture is rejecting most all of these alternatives. If you want proof, just look at these two bits of information from <http://thegospelside.com>:

1. *20-30 year olds attend church at 1/2 the rate of their parents and 1/4 the rate of their grandparents.* Think about the implication for those of us who spent fifteen to twenty years in youth ministry: Thousands of us have invested a good part of our lives in trying to reproduce the faith in the next generation and the group we were tasked with reaching left the church when they left our care.
2. *61% of **churched** high school students graduate and never go back!* (Time Magazine, 2009)
Even worse: *78% to 88% of those **in youth programs today will leave church, most to never return.*** (Lifeway, 2010)

Please read those last two statistics again and let them sink into your thoughts. Why is this happening in the Church today? We have spent millions of dollars and volunteered hundreds-of-thousands of hours with youth groups, retreats, church camps, Sunday schools, etc. We have tried to make the church more youth friendly and more like the social settings they are use to and enjoy, only to have them leave the church and not look back. Why?

When I was talking with the minister of a large, growing contemporary congregation early last summer he told me quite frankly that he only expected to be at his church for another two years and then he would probably leave the ministry. When I asked him why, he responded this way:

Right now we are growing in numbers, but not in commitment. People are showing up and being saved because that is what we are set up to do. It's a numbers racket. The problem is that they don't want to be disciplined, they don't want to make any real changes in their life. I had one couple come to me who had been in the church about two years who asked if there was anything more to being a Christian than what we were giving them. I said sure, but that we are not set up to do any more than bring folks in. I told them that if they wanted anything more, they would have to go somewhere else that was equipped for that kind of ministry. Disappointed, they left and as far as I know they never went anywhere else. I'm tired of bringing people in the front door excited and watching exit out the back door disillusioned.

When I spoke to that same minister last month, he told me that he and his wife were now tandem truck drivers for a national freight hauling company. The church where he ministered is still growing in numbers, but very few stay more than a couple of years before they drop out unless they are involved with infrastructure of the organization in some way.

This same kind of story is being repeated over and over again across our nation. The turnover of people making a commitment and then going nowhere in their faith has inoculated another generation with the anti-religion vaccine. They tried it, it did not take the way they wanted it to and so now they believe that they are immune to its effects. Yet, they still have a spiritual need and hunger that they do not know how to handle. What can be done to try and reach them?

An article from <http://convergemagazine.com> offers this insight:

For many individuals who are in their 20s and following Jesus Christ, a point has been reached where the worship-in-a-vacuum approach of the "seeker-sensitive" movement isn't working anymore. Perhaps there was a time when it was attractive to discount tradition and put hyper-emotionalism and personal experience at the forefront of our expressions of worship. But now that candle is burning out and is being replaced with the incense of traditional hymns mixed with contemporary instrumentation.

Tradition, ritual with meaning and purpose, even discipleship are being reconsidered by young people as a possible answer to their inner, unmet, spiritual needs. Now, ask yourself the question: "Why does attending a church with nothing but a traditional approach to Christianity seem to be more effective at retaining youth than one with specialized youth programs?" Yes, you read it correctly. Traditional worship, where the person is involved and not just sitting in the pew, is growing. For many of those who are seeking a meaningful relationship with Jesus in their lives, the pendulum is now swinging back to traditional styles of worship. Why? Because it is meeting the spiritual needs of young people for a personal relationship with God.

Let me explain it this way. We know that with our physical bodies, a constant diet of sweets and carbs is deadly. Likewise, with our spiritual selves we know that a constant diet of church camp types of worship in a controlled environment with the focus on personal experience and emotions can be just as deadly.

We can suffer from "spiritual obesity" as easily as we can suffer with physical obesity. Jesus dealt with it in His ministry nearly 2,000 years ago. He too contended with the followers who came for the sensational and to be a part of a big, excited group without making any personal commitments.

When things came to a head after the feeding of the 5,000, and Jesus gave them a challenge to be a part of His ministry, they left him. The decline was so devastating and so many “followers” turned away that Jesus even asked His own disciples, “Will you leave me also?” Now if Jesus had a problem with this, what makes us think we will not?

The truth is we are not here for the numbers. Our goal is not to build a megachurch with our own Starbucks and internal softball league. We are not trying to insulate our people from the world and its problems. The truth is we are here to prepare our members to go out into the world to share the light of Christ’s word and presence. We are here to help others learn how to deal with their problems in life from a Christian perspective in a non-Christian environment. We are here to make disciples, not “save people” or keep count of how many raise their hand today and then slip out the back door next week. However, to truly disciple people takes a commitment to learn and a willingness to serve by everyone in the congregation. As an old preacher once remarked in a sermon on the Church, “You are either a missionary or you are the mission field!” That is still true today. That is what is needed to turn the Church in America around. That is what it takes to not be just another, average, normal American congregation. To sum it up in one word, it takes ***involvement*** to be the Church that God expect us to be.

Now that you know what is needed to be what God expects of us, that final question that must be answered. So how are you actively involved in the work of the Church in your life right now? Are you a missionary or a mission field?

Sowing in the morning,

James

