

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

HOW THE CHURCH HAS LOST ITS VISION; A BIBLICAL MODEL  
TO REGAIN ITS MISSION

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Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary  
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BY

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LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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## ABSTRACT

### HOW THE CHURCH HAS LOST ITS VISION; A BIBLICAL MODEL TO REGAIN ITS MISSION

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Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011

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The mission of the church is to make disciples of all the nations. However the church has lost focus of its mission to reach the lost people outside of the church. Over the last several decades the church has become inwardly focused on itself and its members. This has caused the majority of the churches to be in a serious state of decline to the point that many are on the verge of closing. If the church does not rediscover the biblical model that Jesus gave it, it could lead to the end of the church as we know it.

Abstract Length: 100 Words

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

With the majority of the churches in America today being in a serious state of decline in membership and denominational churches dying at an alarming rate and closing their doors for good, we need to figure out what is causing this problem and see if it is correctable. The main question that needs to be answered is what is causing the decline in membership and the closing of so many churches in America? Is it something that the church is doing or not doing that is causing people to turn away and leave, or is it a societal issue in that people today feel the church is out of date and irrelevant to them? This is a serious issue that the church in America cannot continue to ignore. We need to take a good hard look at ourselves and figure out what we need to do to fix the problem. If we continue to ignore this problem we could see the death of the church as we now know it within the next two generations.

The author was lead to this topic because he is currently serving as pastor of one these above mentioned dying churches. He realizes if things don't change the church he serves could close within five years. This church is very similar to the majority of the traditional churches in America. When the number of members started to decline and things started to get tough, the church circled its wagons and started to focus inwardly. All the effort and energy of the church was shifted from outreach and evangelism to inward life support to try to keep the church alive. Instead of focusing outwardly on the needs of those outside the church they are focusing inwardly on what they want and need and what is best for them on the inside of the church. One of the main problems that has brought on these problems is the church has tried to merge the American dream of

prosperity with their faith and have the best of both worlds. They sit in their beautiful buildings waiting for the people to clean themselves up and come to them instead of leaving their buildings and going to the people. This model of church growth goes totally against what the Bible teaches. Christ is very clear in his commandment to believers to go to the people and not sit around and hope the people will come to us. This is not a problem that will be solved by trying new programs and strategies for church growth. This is a problem that can only be solved by teaching the church how to return to the biblical model for church growth as found in the bible.

As one looks around, the church is losing its influence not only on its members but also on our society at a rapid rate. If the church does not correct this problem quickly and right the ship, America will no longer be the Christian nation that it once was. Some would go as far as saying we are no longer a Christian nation. This issue should be at the forefront of every church and denomination in our country. We need to quit trying to stop arterial bleeding with a Band-Aid. The sad part is the church knows what it needs to do to fix the problem, but it is not willing to go through the pain to correct it. If we do not address this problem head on, we could see the end of the church and its influence on the world.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The majority of the churches in America today and the people who attend them have not only lost focus of the mission of the church, they have also lost the desire to carry out the mission of the church. The church in America has become a very inwardly

focused organization that has become obsessed with itself. This turn to self-obsession can be traced to the church and its members trying to merge the American dream of prosperity and easy living with Christianity. Instead of reaching out to those in our communities who have been marginalized and neglected we have circled our wagons and turned the focus on ourselves. We have created safe Christian ghettos to live in, we have built big comfortable buildings to worship in, we have created Christian schools for our children to attend, and we have done more to isolate ourselves from the world than we have done to live in the world. We have done more to keep the sinners out of our churches than we have done to invite them in and lead them to Jesus, the one who can forgive them of their sins. This has caused the rest of society to no longer trust the church. They feel it is out of touch with reality and that its teachings are irrelevant, they feel the church has nothing for them. Many in society today view the church as a social club that only looks after its members and cares very little for anyone who is not a member. They see the church as more of a private social club than a church.

The goal of this project is to help the church realize it is on the wrong course and help it rediscover its mission on earth. The church needs to turn from its inward focus on itself and look to those on the outside who need help. Jesus said in Mark 2: 17, “When Jesus heard this, he told them. Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.”<sup>1</sup> The church needs to rediscover this is where its focus needs to be also, on those outside the church who need Jesus not those on the inside who already know him. Unfortunately this will not be an easy task because the church has become so steeped in

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:17 (NLT).

tradition and rituals that this author really don't think the majority of the people sitting in the pews realize that the train has jumped the tracks. They gauge spirituality by the number of times one goes to church each week and their outward appearance. This transition process will have to start with the pastors and church leaders who need to be willing to stand up and admit that the church has lost its focus. The pastors and leaders of the church will have to help the people rediscover what the bible teaches about the mission and responsibility of Christians, they need to be led back to the bible and what it says.

### **Statement of Limitations**

The main limitations that the author sees for this project will be to get the members of the church to realize how materialistic they have become. Once they realize that they need to get rid of all the stuff that clutters their lives, they need to ask how much should one give away, and get rid of. Getting the people of the churches to realize that there is a problem will be the first step. As we look to the teachings of Jesus and of the New Testament on how believers should live, one has to ask how should I live. Jesus told the rich young man to sell everything and give it to the poor. He also taught us to store our treasures in heaven and not on earth. So how does that look in today's world. Do we still sell all we have and give it away to the poor and needy? Do we trust God to meet all our needs as He says He will? Does one save up money for retirement? If so how much is enough? The Bible is clear that believers need to live a humble life and help those around them. This question is not clearly answered in the bible, exactly how

much should we get rid of. The second limitation will be getting the churches to realize how serious the situation is. The majority of the churches today realize that their numbers are down from what they used to be in the past, but they really don't realize just how serious the problem is. As long as the church is able to pay their bills they feel they are doing okay, they think they are being blessed for what they are doing. This author believes that the majority of the people sitting in the pews of the churches of America truly don't realize just how serious the problem is.

Other than the above mentioned limitations this project should be able to help the majority of the churches realize that the church is dying, and that they can rediscover that the main mission of the church is an outward focus to reach the world for Jesus Christ, not an inward focus on themselves.

### **Theoretical Basis**

The Bible is very clear on how we as Christian should live our lives and how we should reach out to those around us with the good news of Jesus Christ. That is what makes it so hard to understand how the church has gotten so far off track to the point it is on the verge of dying. This is not a gray area of the Bible that is ambiguous as to how and what we should do as Christians. Jesus' teachings are very clear that we as Christians are to live humble lives and reach out to those around us. The Bible strongly supports all that Jesus teaches about this.

Jesus is very clear that we are to store our treasures in heaven and not on earth. We are to invest our time and money into reaching out to those around us who need help.

He does not say we are to invest our time and money into our own selfish desires. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and help those less fortunate than us. Jesus clearly tells us that Christians are to give of their resources and go and take the gospel to the world. Again this is coming from the inspired word of God. This is not the interpretation of some uneducated zealot. We need to figure out how the church has gone from these very clear instruction on how to live and serve humbly to an inwardly focused group of self-serving individuals.

One does not have to spend too much time in the church today or with its members to realize that they have very little in common with the New Testament church. The churches today are big beautiful buildings adorned with comfortable pews, chandeliers, stain glassed windows, and are heated and cooled with heat and air conditioners. The members drive from their oversized luxuries house in the suburbs in one of their several nice cars to their comfortable churches. They selected their outfit to wear to church out of a closet full of nice clothes. When they arrive at church they are then entertained for an hour with music, video, and a gifted speaker who can turn a phrase. Then they go home or to a restaurant and have a big lunch and wait to do it again next Sunday. Now this description is not intended to be a representation of all those who go to church on Sunday mornings. Some church goers are trying to live a Biblical lifestyle as explained in the Bible. Unfortunately they are the minority; the above mentioned group is the majority. Somehow the church in America feels that they deserve the prosperity and affluence they have as a reward for being good Christians.

The above mentioned church is a church that is focused on itself and its members and not on the lost and dying around them. Their church budgets are focused on

programs for themselves they are not focused on those outside of their churches who truly need help. These churches have very little if anything in common with the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament church.

Jesus and the New Testament church went out to the people and invested their time and money in people. They did not invest their time and money into buildings and luxuries. In fact Jesus invested the majority of his time on earth in twelve people, and really three guys within the twelve. Jesus invested in people! This is what the church needs to rediscover, it's not about us on the inside of the church, it's about those outside the church. We need to go out and invest in those people around us who do not know Jesus. We need to meet them at their point of need. We need to clothe them, feed them, heal them, and most importantly share the love of Jesus with them. This is what the bible tells us to do, the church needs to rediscover her first love.

### **Methodology**

The solution to the problem is simple, James said it best in chapter 1 verse 22 of his epistle, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." The church in America knows more about the Bible than it ever has. We know the bible, we know what it says, we just don't do what it says, and we need to stop fooling ourselves. The hard part to the solution will be to get the people in the pews out of their comfort zones, get them to abandon their traditions, and get them to become doers of the Word. The majority of the believers have lost the desire to do the Word of God. Many of them don't know they need to be doers of the Word because they

are not being taught what to do from the pulpit. Many of them are not being shown how to live a servant's life from their leaders. So, it will have to start with preachers and pastors who lead the churches. They need to lead by example and show their members what it looks like to go out into the community and meet the needs of the people. They are going to have to get back to preaching the word of God. They will need to put away their warm and fuzzy feel good sermons and really teach the people what the word of God says.

This project is divided into the following chapters:

## Chapter 2: The Problem within the Church

The first chapter will deal with the lack of focus and the lack of desire to carry out the mission that the church was given by Christ. The church today resembles a member's only social club than it does the church that is explained in the New Testament. The New Testament church is commanded to make disciples of all the nations, its members are instructed to live humble lives and share the gospel with those they come in contact with. They are to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, help the sick and they are to take care of the least of people in society. Unfortunately the church is not doing what it is commanded to do. There is no nice way to sugar coat it, the church is more concerned about itself and its members than it is about the lost and dying in the world.



### Chapter 3: How Did This Happen

The main focus of this chapter will be on how the church has lost its focus and desire to fulfill the commandment that it was given. How did the church get into the situations it's in now? This did not happen overnight, it has been a slow progression over many years. In order for the church to right the ship and get it back on course it will be important for the church to understand how it got so far off course. Learning what caused this situation will also help the church stop from straying off course in the future.

There are many factors that have led to churches being in the current state of brokenness. As one looks back over time it becomes fairly clear how the church has gotten so far off course. One of the main causes is the prosperity that America has experienced over the past century. As the prosperity of the average American rose, their faith started to shift from God to the all mighty dollar to meet their needs. This also happened in the church, as the people got richer the church buildings got bigger and more luxurious. Then they started moving their churches out of the cities and into suburbs to get away from the seediness of the cities. This is when they also started to circle their wagons and focus inwardly on themselves and their wants and desires. Though they won't admit it, this was also done to keep the less desirable people out of their churches.

As the church became more prosperous the responsibility of the members to share the gospel was replaced with paid professionals. Now instead of the people going out and sharing the good news of Jesus with their neighbors they now have paid preachers and evangelists to tell the people. Instead of the church members helping the needy they abdicated that responsibility to organizations like the Salvation Army, Soup Kitchens, and

the Government. Slowly but surely the church and its members have relieved themselves of many of the responsibilities that are given in the Bible. To this day this author can still not figure out why a denomination needs a home mission board to reach the people of America. A culmination of the above mentioned problems and other issues has caused the church to lose its desire to do what it was commanded to do by Christ.

#### Chapter 4: The Numbers Do Not Lie

Even though the previous two chapters show the sad shape the church is in and how it got to that point many will still not believe it is in such bad shape. So this chapter will use the numbers from various churches, associations, and a survey to show that the church truly in serious state of decline. The main information the research from this chapter will show is that across the board the all the numbers are down. The number of churches, baptisms, membership, and outreach have, all declined in the last thirty years. However the amount of money to run the churches and associations continues to increase, so it is costing churches more money to save less people. The research did show that there are a few churches that are growing and reaching their community's for Christ. These are the churches that are investing their time and money on outreach. They are not focused inwardly on themselves; they are focused outwardly on those outside of the church.

## Chapter 5: The Solution

Now that the problem has been identified and we have seen how it has been allowed to happen, we need to look at the solution to the problem. The solution to the problem is fairly easy to figure out, but can be very difficult to implement. The solution to the problems is getting back to the basics of our faith. We need to start living the word of God. We can no longer sit in church and listen to the Word, go to Bible studies and study the Word, and then do nothing with what we have learned. We need to start putting our faith in to action; we need to start doing what the Word of God tells us to do. The members of the church need to relearn what the bible says.

This means the pastor, preachers, and leaders of the church will have to start teaching the whole counsel of God. They will need to teach the people how to read and study the Bible for themselves. Too many members of churches really don't know what the Bible says. They have been told over the years what it says and what to believe by preachers, teachers, and friends. Since the people feel these teachers and preachers are trustworthy and they read and study the Bible as they should, they can trust what they say without reading it for themselves. This point was driven home to this author by an event in his own church. As we started a book study of the book of Mark the comment was made that the author of the book was most likely John Mark who accompanied Paul and Barnabus on their first mission journey and he was not an apostle. An elderly woman who had been saved and a devout member of the church for over sixty years was shocked to hear that news. This is just one example of how members sitting in the pews don't know how to study and understand the bible.

The pastors and leaders of the church will also have to model this servant life style that Jesus modeled for His disciples. The people in the churches need to see their pastors working with the less fortunate and not on the golf course. They need to hear them preach about serving the least of our society and not about how great they are for doing nothing. The one thing the church needs more than anything right now is leaders who lead by example. They need to see them on the front lines getting dirty and doing ministry not set-up on a pedestal and revered.

The members of the church need to rediscover how to serve those around them. We have reduced serving in the church to writing a check so someone else can be paid to go do ministry. The members need to get back into the habit of serving those outside the church. They need to get out and see the faces of the less fortunate, they need to look them in the eye and reach out and touch them, and they need to learn their names. Once they rediscover the joy of serving and seeing the joy in the faces of those they serve they will be hooked. The majority of the members of the churches are not serving because they don't want to, it's because they don't know how to serve or where to serve.

As one has seen the solution to the problem is very simple, it's a matter of getting back to the basics and doing the word of God. Our faith is a participation sport not a spectator sport. Every member of the church needs to be involved in hands on ministry of some type. This cannot be accomplished by some new program or gimmick; this can only be accomplished by living the word of God.

## Chapter 6: Implementation of the Solution

Implementing the solution will most likely be the most difficult part of the project. The reason for the difficulty will be because the majority of the people sitting in the pews don't think there is a problem. They feel that society has the problem and society needs to be more like they are. They expect the people outside of the church to clean up their lives and get their lives straight then come and join them inside the church. So the implementation process will almost need to be a re-education of the majority of the members of the church.

One of the first steps of the solution will start with teaching the church members how to study and read the Bible on their own. Unfortunately many of the members in the church today read the Bible through the lens of their favorite devotional book authors. They read a verse or two from the Bible then two or three paragraphs of what the devotional writers write. When they do this it's hard to read the bible in context as it was written. Very few people read large sections of the Bible at one time anymore. It's hard to get the feel for what the bible says by reading a verse or two at a time. As they start to read and study the Bible more deeply they will need to be taught how to put what they read into action.

Another step of the solution will be to teach the people how to start living the Word of God. The members of the church have lost the desire to get outside of the church and do hands on ministry. They find it easier to pay someone to go out and do ministry or give money to a Para-church organization to do the work. They need to get

out and help those in need and rediscover the joy of hands on helping others. Many of them don't even realize there are people in their cities and neighborhoods who need help.

Church members will also have to be taught how to break out of their comfort zones and get involved in ministry. We have become a society of isolationist, in how we live. With all our advances in technology we have lost the ability to communicate face to face. Many of us have even lost the ability to communicate to our own family members. Unfortunately it will take time to implement these new solutions in order to get the church back on course. Even though it will take time and the road will be rough at times it will work. It has to work because we are the ones God has entrusted to take the gospel to the world.

### **Review of Literature**

In order to complete this thesis project the author reviewed several types of publication from multiple sources to support his thesis. The author used sources from published books, internet sites, and the Holy Bible. The following list of sources is representative of the ones that were used to complete this project.

#### **Books**

*Crazy Love*, by Francis Chan and Danae Yankoski. This book talks about how the majority of churches and their members have lost their commitment to God and have become lukewarm in their faith. They are more worried about themselves than they are

serving God. They also talk about how believers need to rediscover their love for God and serve him.

*Forgotten God: Reversing our tragic neglect of the Holy Spirit*, by Francis Chan and Danae Yankoski. In this book they address the issue of how believers don't live or act as if they have the Holy Spirit in them. They try to accomplish God's will with their own power instead of using the power of the Holy Spirit that lives in them. They then explain how believers need to start living like they are Spirit filled believers.

*Operation Inasmuch: Mobilizing believers beyond the walls of the Church*, by David Crocker. This deals with how the church and its members need to start getting out of the safe confines of the church and start serving those in their communities. The church needs to rediscover the commandments in the Bible that tell them to serve those less fortunate than they are.

*The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but living as if He doesn't exist*, by Craig Groeschel. This book deals with how many people claim to be believers and followers of Jesus but one cannot tell by how they live. If one is a follower of Jesus their lifestyle should be noticeably different from those of society who don't believe. But as the title indicates most Christians lives are no different from none believers. It also explains how believers need to start living a life that is different, more in-line with Jesus teachings.

*not a fan*, by Kyle Idleman. This book is about how many believers are fans of Jesus and no longer true followers of Jesus. He explains how fans are more worried about following traditions, rules, and protecting their image than they are about truly following

Jesus. True followers are more about living and loving as Jesus did and reaching the lost for Jesus.

*UnChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity...and why it matters*, by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. These authors have done extensive research on just how much the church in America has declined. This book also addresses how the church has lost the trust and respect of several generations of non-believers. It also talks about how non-believers view the church as hypocritical, judgmental, and un-carrying. It then talks about the steps the church will need to take to regain the trust of the generations it has lost.

*The American Church in Crisis*, by David Olson. This book was very helpful because it shows just how serious the state of decline the American church is in. It gives hard facts that show if the church does not make some changes it will continue to decline at a rapid pace.

*Radical: taking back your faith from the American Dream*, by David Platt. This book shows how believers have tried to incorporate the American Dream into their faith. They want to have all the luxury and comfort of this world and still call themselves Christians. They want to have all the benefits of the faith but don't want any commitment to Christ for it. It then goes on to explain how we can take ones faith back and live a committed Christian life.

*Radical Together: Unleashing the people of God for the purpose of God*, by David Platt. This is a follow-up book to Mr. Platt's first book. The above mentioned book deals more with the individual taking back their faith. This book as indicated in the title deals more



with helping congregations and groups to live committed to Christ and living a life that reflects that commitment.

*The Externally Focused Church*, by Rick Rusaw and Swanson. This book was very helpful in that it explains how the church needs to be focused externally of the lost and dying outside of the church and not inwardly on itself. This book also addresses how the church was never intended to be an inwardly focused organization. Jesus commanded it to go and spread the gospel and help the less fortunate. This book also focuses on how churches need to be doing much more outreach if they want to survive.

Internet

[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) : This website helped the author show that the population in Pittsylvania county continues to grow while the number of churches is declining. It also helped prove that church growth is not keeping up with population growth.

[www.djchuang.com/2010/churches-closing-and-pastors-leaving/](http://www.djchuang.com/2010/churches-closing-and-pastors-leaving/) : This website was helpful in showing how many churches are closing in America every month and how many pastors leave the ministry every month.

[www.goodmanson.com/church/the-future-dying-church/](http://www.goodmanson.com/church/the-future-dying-church/) : This website also helpful in that it shows how the church is dying in America and that the future does not look good if the church does not make some changes.

[www.churchcentral.com/blog/how-many-churches-close-each-decade/](http://www.churchcentral.com/blog/how-many-churches-close-each-decade/) : This website was helpful in that it also shows how many churches are closing each decade never to reopen.

It also shows that churches are dying when more need to be opened to keep up with the population growth.

## Bible

The following verses were used by the author to show that Jesus never intended for His church to be inwardly focused on itself. They help show that Jesus commanded believers to go to the lost, hurting, and less fortunate and minister to them and love them.

Matthew 4:19; Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!”

Matthew 12:33; “A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad.’

Matthew 22:37-38; Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”

Matthew 24:9; “Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers.”

Matthew 25:19; “After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money.”

Matthew 25:29; To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away.

Matthew 28:19; Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Mark 2:17; When Jesus heard this, he told them, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.”

Mark 9:35; He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to him, and said, “Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.”

Mark 16:15; And then he told them, “Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.”

Luke 14:33; So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.

John 15:12; This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.

Hebrews 13:5; Don’t love money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, “I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.”

1 John 2:15; Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PROBLEM WITH THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

Writing about how the church in America has lost its focus and desire to reach out to the lost in their communities is not an easy thing to do. Very few churches or church leaders are willing to step up and say, we are no longer going to do church the way God has instructed us to do it, we think we have a better plan for how the church should be done. If one recalls this was one of the main problems with the Israelites during Jesus time, they were more worried about keeping their man made traditions that they lost sight of what God had instructed them to do. In fact many of the churches in America are not even aware they are no longer doing the will of God. Also in many churches and denominations it is like an unspoken rule that they do not discuss the fact that they are not doing what God has instructed them to do. Because if the churches acknowledge that they are not doing what God has called them to do then they will have to do something about it and make some changes. This has led most of the churches to become so entangled with traditions that they don't even realize they are not doing church the way God instructs them to do it. As long as they are following their bylaws and Robert's Rules of Order and make sure they have everything published in the bulletin they feel they are doing God's will. Fortunately the numbers don't lie; the majorities of the churches in America have stopped growing and are in a state of declining membership. In fact churches are closing faster than any other time in our history. We can no longer ignore the fact that the church is in serious trouble and if the church does not regain its focus it could close for good.

The church in America has lost its focus and its desire to fulfill the great commission and many other instructions it was given by Jesus in the Bible. Jesus is very clear in Matthew 28:19 where He says, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> This commandment and the other instructions that Jesus gave to his followers have not expired nor do they have any expiration dates on them. These commandments were not just for the apostles and the New Testament church to follow. These commandments still ring true for the church today in 2011, we are still supposed to be going and making disciples. Jesus also goes on to give us many other instructions on how we should live and act as Christians while we attempt to fulfill the Great Commission. We still have this command; “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”<sup>3</sup> So we are not only commanded to go but we are also commanded to love God, and love others, while making disciples of the world. Unfortunately, as time has passed since Jesus originally gave the Great Commission and other instructions on how Christians should live, the urgency to carry them out seems to have lessened for the church and its members.

Jesus was also very clear about the commitment it would take for one to live a Christian life while they attempt to carry out the Great Commission. Not to restate the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus in this paper, however it is important for one

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:19 (NLT).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:37-38 (NLT).

to review what believers have been called to do and how they are to do it. We need to remember why we are here and what we are supposed to be doing. Not only did Jesus instruct us to make disciples of everyone, He also instructed us to love as He loved. In John 15:12, Jesus says, “This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.”<sup>4</sup> We are also to live humble lives and be happy with what we have. In Hebrews 13:5 it says, “Don’t love money; be satisfied with what you have. For God said, I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.”<sup>5</sup> We are not to love the things of this world because they will only distract us from our mission to reach the lost. Our focus cannot be on money and acquiring stuff, our focus needs to be on acquiring souls for the Kingdom. In 1 John 2:15 it says, “Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the father in you.”<sup>6</sup> In fact Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Our focus needs to be on Jesus and how we can better serve Him and not on ourselves and what is in it for us. Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus teach that it is all about us and us living comfortable lives with minimal commitment and effort. He does not teach us that life will become easy and without problems once one becomes a believer. In fact Jesus tells us we will be persecuted and hated for following Him; families will be torn apart because of Him. In fact in Matthew 24:9 Jesus says, “Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers.”<sup>7</sup> Since Jesus is very clear about what the mission of the church is and how its members are to live their lives for

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<sup>4</sup> John 15:12 (NLT).

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 13:5 (NLT).

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 2:15 (NLT).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 24:9 (NLT).

Him, one has to ask why is the church and its members not following His commandments today? One would think if the church today was doing the things that Jesus is commanding it to do it would be growing and thriving like the New Testament church did. However the majority of the churches in America today has lost their focus on Jesus commandments and do not resemble the New Testament church at all.

The church in America has become an inwardly focused organization that has become obsessed with itself and its members. The church is no longer outwardly focused; it is no longer an outreach group that goes out to evangelize its neighbors. It is no longer trying to figure out how to move forward into the twenty-first century and reach out to an ever changing society. No, the church has circled its wagons and has become an inwardly focused group that is trying to find a map that will take them back to the 1950's. They want to go back to the Ward and June Clever days when the family stayed together and went to church together. They want to go back to days when the church was booming and society in America was still Christian and the church still had an influence on the people. Unfortunately those days are gone and if the church does not make some changes they will be gone for good too. The church today is more concerned about keeping the members they have happy and entertained rather than they are about reaching out to the lost and hurting in their community. This inward focus has caused many churches to stop growing and move into a state of stagnation or declining membership and if things don't change they will continue to decline until they close. All

mainline denominations are projected to continue to decline, continuing a downward slide that started in 1965.<sup>8</sup>

### **How Bad Is It?**

Unfortunately the decline of the church in America is much worse than anyone wants to admit. No church wants to say that they have lost their focus and are no longer carrying out the Great Commission that Jesus gave them. No church wants to admit that their declining membership is due to their lack of outreach and inward focus on themselves. The majority of them continue to live a lie and not accept the truth or they want to blame it on society, but the facts and research don't lie. The *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* compiled data from more than 300,000 Christian congregation in the United States and found that the churches totaled 52 million people in attendance, or 17.7 percent of the American population in 2004.<sup>9</sup> Simple math shows that if 17.7 percent are attending church than 82.3 percent of the American population is not attending church. Unfortunately that number has only grown since 2004 as the population of America has increased since their study in 2004. More than 91 million people live in the United States today who did not live here 16 years ago.<sup>10</sup>

Not only is the church in America not keeping up with the population growth, many of them are having a hard time just staying opened. In America, 3500-4000

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<sup>8</sup> Olson, David, *The American church in Crisis*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 36.



churches close their doors each year. Half of all churches last year did not add one new member through conversion growth. Also churches lose an estimated 2,765, 000 each year to nominalism and secularism.<sup>11</sup> Of the churches that are growing, only 15% of churches in the United States are growing and just 2.2% of those are growing by conversion growth.<sup>12</sup> So the few churches that are growing in America are growing mainly by internal growth, which usually means church member's children joining or people joining from other churches or denominations. So in reality the only thing that is happening in church growth is a shuffling of the deck when it comes to growth. A new church opens, a church gets a new pastor, or a church gets some hot new technology installed. Then people who are not happy with their church or just want something new will come and join the church. Very few churches are making a conscious effort to go after the lost un-churched people groups in their communities. A survey of religious affiliation by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life was done. The report depicts a highly fluid and diverse national religious life. If shifts among Protestant denominations are included, then it appears that 44% of Americans have switched religious and denominational affiliations.<sup>13</sup> So it appears that it is easier and more economical for churches to lure members over from other churches and denominations than it is to go after the lost un-churched populations in their communities. There is also less training and indoctrination to be done with transfer growth because they already know what is going on and how things work. Nor do they have to worry about all the possible

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<sup>11</sup> Goodmanson, D., *The Future Dying Church*. <http://www.goodmanson.com/church/the-future-dying-church/>. 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Chuang, D.J. *Churches closing and pastors leaving*. <http://djchuang.com/2010/churches-closing-and-pastors-leaving/>.

<sup>13</sup> The New York Times. February 25, 2008.

uncertainties of new converts. A combination of the above mentioned problems has caused the majority of the churches in America to circle their wagons and start focusing more inwardly on themselves then outwardly on the lost. The church today has become content with mediocrity. They feel as long as they are able to pay the bills and keep the doors open they are blessed and doing God's will. They are more worried about holding on to what they have then reaching out and trying to grow. They want to grow and they will say that want to grow, but their actions don't show it. What makes this so sad is that it is happening in America a country founded on religious freedoms. This is a country with freedom of speech, a country where religious freedoms are protected, a country with college and seminaries built for the sole purpose of training people to spread the gospel. America is a country where one can stand on the street corner and share the gospel twenty-four hours a day and not have to worry about persecution from the government or being imprisoned. Still the church is dying at an alarming rate.

What really puts the state of the church in America into prospective is when one looks at the church in China. The church in China is under constant persecution; in fact it is illegal for the church to even exist. Yet, even the Chinese government admits that Protestant Christians have increased from 1 million in 1950 to 16 million today. But these figures do not account for many millions who meet secretly in home congregations. David Aikman, former Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine, suggests in his book *Jesus in Beijing* that Christians may number as many as 80 million—this is an officially atheistic state that has repeatedly persecuted believers.<sup>14</sup> If that does not bring one to

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<sup>14</sup> Yancey, Phillip. "Discreet and dynamic: why, with no apparent resources, Chinese churches thrive." *Christianity Today*, 2004, 48, no. 7: 72-318. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2011).

tears over the state of the church in America I don't know what will. In China, an atheistic country, where believers have no freedoms and are constantly being persecuted, the church is growing at a rapid rate. But here in America, a country founded on religious freedom, the church is dying. It just goes to show how inwardly focused the church in America has become. It no longer has the desire to fulfill the commandment it was given by Christ to take the gospel to the world. It is more worried about keeping the members they have happy. The church in China trains its new workers how to witness for the Lord under any circumstances, and that means handcuffed and being led to the execution ground. They're training people how to pick handcuffs, and how to jump out of a two-story building without breaking an ankle in escape.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese are training their believers to give their lives if necessary to spread the gospel of Jesus. The American church can't even get its members to share Jesus with their neighbors and friends, or give up their TV shows or sports to attend church much the less give their life up for Jesus. In fact in China they believe that sometimes God sends them to prison so they can have a prison ministry.<sup>16</sup> Here the American church has everything going for it and it should be growing at record rates. There is no reason that every person in America has not been told about Jesus. But, unfortunately due to the selfishness and laziness of the believers in the American church our country is being taken over by Satan. Yet we still have the audacity to wonder why we don't see miracles, revivals, or God moving in our country today. We want God's favor and blessing on our country and our lives but

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<sup>15</sup> Stafford, Tim and Paul Hattaway. "A captivating vision: why Chinese house churches may just end up fulfilling the Great Commission." *Christianity Today*, 2004, 48, no. 4: 84-86. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 86.

we don't want to have to make any sacrifices or commitment to get them. We want our faith to be like the American dream, we want something for nothing, and we want to get rich quick. One brother is often challenged with the question, "Why don't we see miracles in the West like you do in China?" These days he's come to ask, "Are you really proclaiming the gospel for the lost humanity of the world?"<sup>17</sup> The church in America can't focus on the lost humanity because it has become too focused on itself.

### **The Inwardly Focused Church**

When the mainline denominations started to decline in membership in the mid-sixties their focus also started to shift from outward to inward. The church is now more concerned about keeping its current members instead of going after the lost and un-churched people in their communities. As time goes by this inward focus is becoming more obvious to those both inside and outside of the church. The church today looks and functions nothing like the New Testament church in the bible. The majority of the churches today function more like a social club than they do a church that is commissioned to make disciples of the world. Their members are more worried about achieving the American dream than they are about sharing Jesus with their neighbor. The people in the pews seem to be more worried about pursuing the luxuries of this world instead of pursuing God. They are trying to merge the American dream together with being a Christian so they can have the best of both worlds. But as one reads the Bible it is very clear that the two do not mix together, they are like oil and water. I am concerned

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 86.

that all of us-pastors and church members in our culture-have blindly embraced an American dream mentality that emphasizes our abilities and exalts our name in the ways we do church.<sup>18</sup> The church seems to have forgotten that it's not about us and our desire being fulfilled, it's about God's desires being fulfilled. It is not about what we can accomplish through our own power, it's about what can be accomplished by the power of God flowing through a surrendered believer.

Very few of the churches in America today will admit that they are no longer focused of fulfilling the great commission. They will not openly say we don't want to go and evangelize the lost and dying people in our communities. In fact the majority of them have constructed beautiful mission statements that say they care very much about the lost. They will tell you their mission is to win the lost at any cost. In fact they will tell you they want to win them and train them and help them become disciples of Jesus who will go out win others to Jesus. Unfortunately the numbers don't lie. How can this be when only 2.2% of the un-churched people are being reached? How can this be when the majority of the churches in America will have no baptisms in a year's time? How can this be when the majority of a churches budget is allocated to internal programs and very little if any is allocated local community outreach? Things are not adding up, the church is not doing what it says it does. The church and its members are more worried about themselves and what is in it for them than they are about saving the lost. Francis Chan makes a great comment in his book, *Crazy Love*, "From start to finish this movie is obviously about God. He is the main character."<sup>19</sup> How is it possible that we can live as

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<sup>18</sup> Platt David. *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From The American Dream*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 49.

though it is about us? This is most evident in the way the church has become more of an isolationist group than an outreach group.

### **The Isolated Church**

As already mentioned Jesus made it very clear in the great commission that the church is to go into the world and make disciples of all the nations. Jesus also said in John 17:18, Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. Jesus also went onto say in Mark 16:15, "... Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone."<sup>20</sup> So once again Jesus has made it very clear as to what the church and its members are supposed to do. Yet the church today is doing more to isolate itself from the world than it is to go into the world.

It started when the churches began building big beautiful comfortable building for their members to come to and meet in. Some of these buildings today are multi-million dollar buildings with every creature comfort that anyone could dream of having. Some even have coffee shops and food courts in them so their members have everything they want right at their fingertips, that way they don't have to go out into the world for anything. If they have children they can drop them off in the nursery or Sunday school area and leave their child's Christian education up to the church. Then as one moves into the sanctuary they will find comfortable padded pews to sit on. Then they are entertained with great music piped through an outstanding sound system that is run by trained sound

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<sup>19</sup> Chan, Fancis. *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs: David Cook Publishing, 2010), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Mark 16:15 (NLT).

technicians. Many churches have even installed huge screens that allow them to project videos, hymns, and scripture verse on the screens. Some churches are so big they even have live cameras on the stage so the performers are projected on the screens so everyone can see them and keep them entertained and keep them coming back. Some churches even have live bands, orchestras, and professional singers. This is not just limited to big mega-churches this is a trend that is happening in all types and sizes of churches. The reason the majority of the churches do all this is to attempt to draw people to them. Yet that is the opposite of what Jesus tells us to do which is go to the people who need the gospel.

Very often many of these above mentioned churches will start their own daycare centers and schools for their member's children. Now they will say they are open to the public and any child can attend, but that is not always the case. Unfortunately the vast majority of the children that attend these schools are children of church members. Usually the schools demographic make-up is not the same as the demographic make-up of the city it is in. This is caused by several factors such as the cost of the school, the ability of the student to get to the school, and the ability of a child to be accepted into the school. If their child is accepted into the school the parents have to then be able to pay the tuition to send their child because these schools they are never free. However many times tithing members of the church will get discounted tuition to get their children to attend. After these churches get their children taken care of, some of them then turn to the economic community. Some churches have even gone as far as putting together a book of Christian businesses within their community so their members will know where to spend their money. Christian schools run by a Christian churches that take their

children out of society and then they try to get Christians to only do business with Christian stores. Again this does not sound very much like Jesus teachings or New Testament teachings. However if the parents would leave their children in the public schools and become as involved with them as they are the private schools the school systems would improve and they would not seem like isolationist.

All this does is produce a group of Christian isolations who want nothing to do with those outside of their group. These Christians go to church with the same group, their kids go to the school together, they shop at the same stores, they hang out together, and some even have their own language they speak. They have developed a whole language they use when talking with each other often referred to as “Christianise” or “church talk”. So now they have very little, if any contact with people outside of their Christian “ghetto”. This seems more like a social club than the church Jesus commissioned the church to take the gospel to sinners who live in the real world not isolate themselves from them. Those outside of the church are very aware of this behavior because they see it with their own eyes. Nearly one-quarter describe Christians as using special words and phrases no one else can understand. And half of all young outsiders said that Christianity seems like a club only certain people can join. One person from Indiana described it this way: “Christians enjoy being in their own community. The more they seclude themselves, the less they can function in the real world. So many Christians are caught in the Christian ‘bubble.’”<sup>21</sup> This is not the behavior that Jesus expects from his church. He wants us to follow his example and go to the people and minister to them in the real world where they live. He wants us to go out among the

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<sup>21</sup> Kinnaman, David. *Un Christian: what a new generation really thinks about Christianity...and why it matters* (Grand Rapid: Baker Books, 2009), 123.



sinner and share the gospel with them. Jesus certainly does not want us to be holed up in our Christian ghettos and wait for the people to come to us. That goes against everything Jesus taught us to do. All this does is produce a group of Christians who are only worried about their own wellbeing and have little if any concern for the lost and dying in their communities.

### **Self-Obsessed Christians**

The church should not be held totally at fault for this inward focus it has developed. The members who sit in the pews every Sunday are just as much at fault if not more at fault than the church is. It is the member's desire to live the American dream that is stronger than their desire to live a life that is committed to Christ. This desire to merge the American dream with their faith has produced churches full of lukewarm Christians that are more worried about themselves than fulfilling the commandments of Christ.

The prosperity of this great nation we live in has been one of the greatest stumbling blocks for the average church member than anything else. Our society has taught us that more is better, he who dies with the most toys, wins. In America we pull ourselves up by our own boot straps and make something of ourselves. Society tells us we need bigger houses, newer cars, and the latest gadget that comes out. It is all about us, we deserve to be comfortable, we deserve that vacation, we deserve that new car, and we deserve it all because we have worked hard to earn those things. We feel the more money we have the more stuff we can buy and the happier we will be. We think that

happiness can be bought. We have IRA's and saving accounts so we can make sure we are comfortable when we retire and stop working. All this does is cause us to depend on ourselves and not on God. Furthermore we try to justify all our stuff by saying God would want me to have all of this. In fact we want the best of both worlds; we want all our stuff and all the benefits of being a Christian. We want God's benefits without changing how we live. We want His best, without our sacrifices.<sup>22</sup> As one knows serving God is about sacrifice, it's about giving stuff away in order to better serve those around us. It's never about comfort and the accumulation of stuff for ourselves, it is always about giving. Many Christians even though they know it is wrong and contrary to the word of God, they want what they want no matter what the word of God says. We have been taught by shifty advertisement companies that true happiness is found in obtaining more stuff. Usually, without our knowing it, our pursuit of happiness through stuff is doomed to fail because it is based on a lie. Our actions confirm that a disturbing number of us truly believe this equation: better possessions + peaceful circumstances + thrilling experiences + the right relationships + the perfect appearance = happiness.<sup>23</sup> Not only do they think all the stuff they acquire will bring them happiness they even believe it is a blessing from God.

What is so surprising is that the people who are justifying and encouraging this type of lifestyle have been members of the church for the majority of their lives. They have been attending church and hearing the word of God preached for the majority of their lives, yet they blatantly ignore God's teachings. Why do they think that they can

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<sup>22</sup> Groeschel, Craig, *The Christian atheist: Believing in God but living as if He Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Zondevan, 2010), 236.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 169.

live contrary to God's word and not be held accountable? This has caused many church members to justify their lifestyle through legalistic living. They no longer do what the word of God says; but that's okay because they go to church every Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening for pray time and Bible study. They have reduced spirituality to attendance.

A combination of all the above mentioned problems has caused the church to not be trusted by the very people it has been instructed to reach. Society today does not trust the church any more. They don't feel that the church has any relevancy for them in 2011. They feel the church is an outdated organization that can no longer help people today. Unfortunately the church is doing very little to help change their reputation with the people who live outside the doors of their comfortable church buildings.

### **How Non-Believers View the Church**

The church, as described in the New Testament, is supposed to be a safe haven where anyone and everyone is welcomed. It is a place where those who have been neglected by society can come and be welcomed and feel safe. It is a place where people can come and grow in the word of God and learn how to serve and love others. One would think as time has passed and how society has advanced, the church would only be a better place that meets everyone's needs. Unfortunately the inward focus has caused the very people the church is to reach, feel like unwelcomed outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject

Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.<sup>24</sup> How sad is that? The very people the church should be reaching out to feel rejected by Christians therefore they reject Jesus. These people are not giving Jesus a chance because they feel rejected by Christians. That alone should break the heart of every Christian sitting in every pew in America. The church is causing people to choose hell over Jesus because of the way we act. The churches supposed to be followers of Christ, His hands and feet on the earth, the very ones who are supposed to take the gospel to the world and the world feels rejected by us. That is a sad testament to the state of the church in America. The saddest part about this is the younger generations are the ones who feel most rejected by the church. These are the ones the church really needs to be reaching out to and leading to Jesus. If we do not win them to the Lord and get them involved in the church, the church will die.

People of all ages desire to be more spiritual than they have ever been in the history of America. They know there is something out there that is bigger than they are and they truly want to figure out what it is so they can have a spiritual connection with whatever it is. Unfortunately they don't know that spiritual being is God. That is the reason we see so many new cult religions popping up all over the country. These people are looking for the answers to their spiritual questions. Yet because of our actions and attitudes they don't think the church has the answers to their questions. If something doesn't change pretty soon the church could be on the road to extinction. One of the main reasons these people feel this way is due to the churches unwillingness to keep up with the times or in other words, change. Unfortunately, for the church, change has become the new unpardonable sin, and things that don't change die. Extinction occurs

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<sup>24</sup> Kinnaman, 11.

most often when a species faces a crisis or change in its environment and is unable to adapt.<sup>25</sup> So if the church is not willing to make some changes it could be closing its doors for the last time.

Not only has the church lost the desire to go out to the people in their communities and share the Gospel with them, they have also lost the desire to show them love when they come to visit the church. The church is no longer a friendly and inviting place full of people wanting to love newcomers and help them like churches were in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, and in fact the entire embryonic days of the church, local fellowships were warm and inviting families, often given to extraordinary acts of generosity and love.<sup>26</sup> The typical church in America today is not as inviting as the early church was. When a non-believer who has never been to church before walks into a typical church today they are usually welcomed and handed a bulletin and directed to the sanctuary. Once in the sanctuary they find a seat, hoping it's not the pew of a long time member of the church, and start looking over the bulletin to try figure out what to expect during the service. Most likely no one will come over and greet them or explain to them how the service will transpire. Then the music starts and sounds like nothing they hear on the radio or TV. So now they start to feel a little uneasy about what to expect. Then, when they start to sing the first hymn they quickly realize one does not read a hymn like they do a regular book. So while the members are singing the first line of the second chorus they are singing the second line of the first chorus and feel embarrassed because they are singing the wrong thing. Then the pastor starts speaking "Christianese" when he

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<sup>25</sup> Olson, David. *The American Church in crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 118.

<sup>26</sup> Brunson, M. & Caner, E. *Why Churches Die: Diagnosing lethal poisons in the body of Christ*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2005), 9.

tells everyone to rise for the doxology and everyone stands and starts sing a song without the hymnal. Finally the visitor catches a break during the sermon because he doesn't have to do anything but sit, except once again the pastor starts to speak in the secret code again and says, if one wants to be saved, come forward. The visitors are thinking saved from what? Then their asked to bow for the benediction and the pastor walks out saying something. So as one can see going to church for a non-believer who has never been before can be a very intimidating and scary situation. Yet the church continues to do church the way it has for over a hundred years, with no concern for the visiting non-believers. This combined with the behavior of the church members is it any wonder that the church is dying in America.

This is a very serious problem that the church can no longer afford to ignore. If the church does not make some changes in the near future they lose any chance they had to reach out to the non-believers in their communities. Kinnaman says, "What we found was their perceptions are more than superficial image problems. Often outsiders' perceptions of Christianity reflect a church infatuated with itself."<sup>27</sup> The church should be infatuated with lost and dying souls outside its buildings, not holed up inside worrying about themselves. It is sad to think that those outside of the church view it as self-centered. The very ones Jesus commissioned us to make disciples of, think the church is self-centered and wants nothing to do with them.

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<sup>27</sup> Kinnaman, 14.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HOW THE CHURCH IN AMERICA LOST ITS FOCUS

As mentioned in the first chapter, the church in America is no longer carrying out the mission it has been given by Jesus to reach the world for Him. The church is no longer an outwardly facing group that goes out to meet the spiritual and physical needs of those in their communities. Instead the church has chosen to circle its wagons and focus all their energies inwardly on themselves. One of the important parts of this project is to try and figure out how and why this has happened to the church. We need to understand how the church went from a thriving church that was growing by leaps and bounds in the New Testament to a church that is in a serious state of decline in 2011. One of the reasons this decline in the church is so shocking is because America was founded on religious freedoms. At no other time in history has the church had the freedom to spread the word of God than they do in 2011. The church also has more resources and abilities to spread the Word than ever before, yet the church is dying. Another important issue that needs to be looked into is why has this been allowed to happen to the church. The Bible is more understandable today than it has ever been; we have more tools to help us understand the Bible than ever before, yet still the church is not doing what it is told to do. It is shocking to think that church feels it can ignore the Word of God and get away with it. The church is running out of time to find a solution to these problems and regain its focus on the commandments that Jesus gave them.

## **Prosperity of the Nation and the People**

Most people would think the prosperity of a nation and its people as good thing and in most cases it would be. Unfortunately, for the church in America prosperity has turned out to be a bad thing. America has always been known as the land of opportunity, the land of the American Dream. Anyone in America can become whatever they want to be. They just pull themselves up by their boot straps, and put their nose to the grind stone and do it. Who would have thought that such opportunity and prosperity could become the downfall of the church? One would think that a country that was founded on religious freedom, and having reaped the fruits of such great prosperity, would realize that this prosperity is from God. One would also think this fact would never allow people to forget how God has blessed this country. Unfortunately in America, the exact opposite is true. The church in America has become like the Israelites wondering in the desert after Moses had lead them out of bondage in Egypt. The Israelites had just seen God deliver them from bondage, they saw God part the Red Sea, they saw God lead them with a pillar of fire and smoke, and they saw God provide them with water, and manna yet they still didn't get it, they wanted to return to bondage in Egypt. They saw the blessings of God firsthand and still didn't get it; they still didn't put their faith in God. The prosperity and wealth that Americans have been blessed with has caused them to put their faith in themselves and what they can do and not in God and what He can do and what He has done. This transfer of faith from God to our own abilities and our ability to prosper did not happen overnight. As with most detrimental habits, it has been a long slow process of gradual, almost unnoticeable changes.



As one looks back over the history of America one can see that this nation has always been prosperous. America has come from a fledgling country, to the most powerful and wealthy country in the world in about 250 years. This prosperity is what has helped fuel the rapid growth that America has experienced over the last two centuries. Everyone wants to come to America and experience the “American Dream.” Unfortunately for the church this prosperity has caused the majority of her members to shift their focus from God to themselves. The membership no longer sees a need to depend on God for all their needs because they can supply everything they need for themselves. We started to put our trust in our money and not in God. Trusting in money generally sneaks up on us. Most of us believe (maybe secretly) that money can bring us happiness.<sup>1</sup> This started to sneak up on the people in the church shortly after World War II. The country started to grow at a rapid pace and there were plenty of good paying jobs. As the wages continued to increase over the years so did the amount of discretionary money. People were making more money than they had in the past. This also meant they had more money to spend. This coupled with the housing boom, and the new found mobility of the nation, lead people to move to better paying jobs. It also allowed them to buy nice new houses and cars with their newfound wealth. It created a much larger middle class of people who had worked hard and earned enough money so they could start to live a little better. As time went on in America and the economy continued to grow things continued to get better for the average American. The church in America also benefited from all this newfound wealth. Churches were growing, new buildings were being built, pastor’s salaries were increasing, and it appeared that the church was

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<sup>1</sup> Groeschel, Craig. *The Christian atheist: Believing in God but living as if He Doesn’t Exist*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 180.

doing as good as the country. This was also a time in America when just about everyone went to church; they not only went to church but went as a family. The late 40's all the way through the 50's and even into the early 60's the American family was most likely at its religious peak. They went to church together, the parents took an active role in their child's religious upbringing, parents tithed and taught their children to tithe, and everything seemed to be just great for the church. In reality it was a very good time for the church, but as with most things when they start to go good people start to get lazy and fall into bad habits and this is what happened to the church. But in the early 1960s their growth slowed down, and after the middle of the decade they had begun to lose members. With very few exceptions, the decline has continued to this date.<sup>2</sup>

As the country moved through the seventies, eighties, nineties, and now into the twenty-first century, the country's economy continued to grow and so did the quality of life for the average American. Unfortunately for the church, as the economy grew and the population of the country continued to grow, the church continued its downward slide in attendance and membership. While all this was going on the only people who don't see it or don't want to see it are the people in the church. It's very much like what Francis Chan said in his book *Crazy Love*, "My caution to you is this: Do not assume you are good soil. I think most American churchgoers are the soil that chokes the seed because of the thorns. Thorns are anything that distracts us from God. When we want God and a bunch of other stuff, then that means we have thorns in our soil. A relationship with God simply cannot grow when money, sins, activities, favorite sports

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Benton, Dean R Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens. "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline." *First Things*, 1993 no. 31: 13-18. *ATLA Religious Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 7, 2011).

teams, addictions, or commitments are piled on top of it.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the church has the cruise control on thinking that they are the good soil and everyone else is the bad soil. As time continues to pass the church continues to think they are alright. It’s all those outside the church that have the problems. In fact now many Christian believe the reason they have experienced such wealth and prosperity is because they are blessed by God. Some even feel they are owed riches from God for their service to Him. They feel that the money and good living is the blessing owed them for their obedience. Yet, in the dawn of this new redemptive history, no teachers (including Jesus) in the New Testament ever promise material wealth and reward for obedience.<sup>4</sup> So all this prosperity that has been so good for the nation has not been so good for the church or its members. All it has done for them is caused them to transfer their faith from God to themselves and their money. As if the above mentioned issues aren’t bad enough, they are not the only cause of the church’s loss of focus.

### **Rebellion and Exodus of Young People**

It is hard to tell the exact number of young people who no longer attend church or who have never been to church but it’s safe to say that number is huge. Kinnaman & Lyons state that, out of ninety-five million Americans who are ages eighteen to forty-one, about sixty million say they have already made a commitment to Jesus that is still

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<sup>3</sup> Chan, Francis. *Crazy Love*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Platt, David. *Radical: Taking back your faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 117.

important; however, only about three million of them have a biblical worldview.<sup>5</sup> So that means over fifty-seven million young people are no longer active in the church. That also means for the last thirty-five years the church in America has been asleep at the wheel while the youth of our country leave the church at record numbers. Since the church has been so inwardly focused during this time it has allowed multiple generations of young people to slip through its fingers. The saddest part about all these young people the church has lost over time is that these young people the church neglected are now having children of their own. What are the odds that these young people's children will hear about Jesus or become involved in a local church when their parents have no concept of church? This exodus of young people can be traced back to the start of the decline in membership for the church as a whole in the mid-sixties. Why have so many young people departed? One theory attributes the decline to the shift toward greater individual autonomy and freedom from institutional restraints that got under way in the mid-1960's.<sup>6</sup> The timeline for the youth exodus parallels the prosperity time line of the country. As the family's quality of life improved so did the freedom given to their children. It was around the mid-sixties that the families started to develop more discretionary money which eventually trickled down to youth in the form of allowances or after school jobs. This in turn caused the youth to feel they needed and deserved more freedom in their lives. This new found freedom that the young people started to experience caused them to start to question the authority of the parents and that of the church. It also caused them to start to question the hypocrisy of the church. The first of

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<sup>5</sup> Kinnaman, D. & Lyons, G. *Unchristian: what a new generation really thinks about Christianity...and why it matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Benton, 15.

these, widely propounded in the late 1960s but no longer heard, attributes the exodus of young people to protest against the churches' supposed indifference to the suffering and struggles of the blacks, the poor, and other oppressed groups.<sup>7</sup> The church that is supposed to look out for the less fortunate was not practicing what it preached and the young people saw this happen and ended up leaving the church.

This desire for freedom that youth were experiencing was expressed in many different ways during the sixties. As one looks back to the sixties they will see it was a time a rebellion among the younger generations. They wanted to break free of the restraints of the times. They saw the early hypocrisy of the church and their families and they wanted nothing to do with it. They were already wise to the, "do as I say and not as I do" cliché that the church and their families were telling them. They saw the wrongs and injustices going on in the country and wanted to help change it. When the church refused to help because it was so inwardly focused it only caused the young people to question the authority of the church even more. This also caused the young people to leave the church and take up these causes on their own. Unfortunately this trend has continued over the last thirty plus years and the church has yet to be willing to take a hard look at itself and correct the problem and until it does they will continue to lose its young people.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 14.

## **Mobility of the People**

It used to be that the majority of the people in America were born, raised, and buried in the same town. This also meant that the majority of the people in these towns would go to the same church for their entire lives. This phenomenon was largely due to the lack of mobility of the American people, most people were limited in distance of their travels, as to how far they could walk. Families would get up on Sunday mornings and walk to church and then walk home when the service was complete. This is why the majority of towns in America have a row of churches all within a two or three block area downtown, so everyone could walk to the church of their choice. During these times the majority of people were limited to which church they would attend by which ones were close enough to walk to. Many people did not change churches or denominations during these times. But just as the prosperity of the people in America increased so did their mobility. Thanks to this newfound mobility, brought on by the automobile, people are no more limited to churches in walking distance. Now there church choices were only limited to the distance they were willing to drive to attend services.

With the average household income increasing and automobiles becoming more affordable since the 1960s it is not uncommon for the average family in America to own two or more autos. One might ask what does this have to do with the church losing its focus on its mission to reach the world; in fact one might even say this could help the church. The problem with this new found mobility and the church is that it has given the members of the churches the ability to church hop. This means if they become disenchanted with their local church or have a falling out with another member they no longer have to work out their differences in a Christian manner they can simple drive to a

church in another town. This also means that if a new church opens with an exciting new worship program or an inspiring new preacher people can simply drive to that church. In some of our country's larger urban areas it is not unheard of for people to drive an hour or more to attend church. This newfound mobility has not been limited to the church members. Churches have also moved.

The cases of churches moving locations have mainly been limited to the larger cities in America. As mentioned above the majority of the churches in the urban areas of America are in the downtown area of the cities. But over the years, as the cities started to grow, the more affluent families could afford to move out of the urban areas into the suburbs. At first even though the families moved, the churches stayed in town. But as the cities continued to grow the downtown areas started to become seedier. The once affluent parts of the city with the nice churches are now filled with less desirable people. One would think this is the very place the church would want to be, in the middle of people who need Jesus Christ in their lives, but not so. Now the members with the money that had moved to the suburbs now had to come back into the not so good parts of town to go to church and they did not like that. So instead of trying to help clean up the city, which the church was in they would move the church to the suburbs also. They would find some land away from the destitute downtown area and build a new church away from all the less desirable people. Some churches have been through this process several times in the life of their church. As the less desirables move further out of the downtown area and into their neighborhoods they simple move themselves and their church further out and away from the troubled parts of town. All of this prosperity and

mobility has caused the church in America some even bigger problems than its member moving from church to church.

In order to keep their members from leaving them for a more exciting or new church many churches have become more inwardly focused on what they can do to keep their faithful few happy and at home. This has lead churches to focus on developing programs to entice their members to stay. This has also led some churches to look the other way when it comes to certain church doctrines so they won't step on too many toes and drive away more members. Because if the members become unhappy they will leave the church and take their tithes with them then church will not be able to meet its budget requirements.

### **Liberalness of Belief Systems**

This fear of losing members has caused many churches to shy away from preaching and teaching the Bible as a whole. As our society has become more and more liberal over the last few decades some of this liberalness has worked its way into the church. In fact, the churches in America have softened their views on many sins that they would not have tolerated in the past. Many churches have shifted to a feel good ministry approach as they try to hold onto members and lure new members in. Many voices today, in fact, are claiming that teaching or preaching the Bible simply doesn't work as well as it used to.<sup>8</sup> The Bible is our final revelation from our God and many in the church feel it does not work as well as it used to. Is there any wonder why the church is dying

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<sup>8</sup> Platt, 46.



when people feel that way about the word of God? Unfortunately today when pastors stand in pulpits and preach the Word of God and convict people of their sins, people tend to leave the church for a church that is more tolerable of their sins.

Our society has become so self-centered that it has lost focus on everything that does not make their lives better and easier. This is the type of attitude that has crept into the church. The members don't want to hear about how they have fallen in to sin and need to repent, they just want to hear a warm fuzzy sermon on how good they are. This is one of the reasons there has been such a large increase in the prosperity preachers and the name and claim it preachers. There increase is because people want to hear how the Lord will bless them for living marginal lives and having a non-sacrificial faith. This just shows that many in the church have been taken over by the age old societal desire, of wanting "something for nothing." They want all the benefits of being a Christian without having to give anything up for God. So when a church or a preacher continually points out all their short comings and how they need to repent and turn to God, people tend to leave the church. When members leave they take their tithes with them and now the church is losing money. So in many cases the pastors have found it easier to go with the flow and keep everyone happy by preaching a feel good gospel that keeps the people in the pews and tithing, but does very little to further the Kingdom of God on earth. It is not their fault; it is ours. For the last twenty years, since the second "Jesus Revolution" movement of the mid-1980s, our churches have fed them a steady diet of "lite" sermons. Our pulpits began to confuse relevance with truth. We began to expound sermons on "Fifteen Reasons to Get Up Tomorrow" and "Thirty Ways to Get Over a Heartache...The problem is that the Christian audience in general has developed an aversion to the most

profound and deep truths of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Very few churches are teaching the whole Word of God anymore and then we can't understand why the church is having so many problems and is dying.

This has led to a much bigger problem both inside and outside of the church and that is the authority of Scripture. It is clear that we live in an age in which the authority of Scripture in our lives has been replaced by the authority of the self: we are encouraged on all sides to take charge of our lives and use our own experience as the authoritative text by which we live.<sup>10</sup> One sees this problem in the church every day. The members know what the Bible says about sin and how they should live, but they continue to blatantly ignore it. Evidently they don't see the Word of God as authoritative or they just don't care. These are God's so called people. These are the members of the church. This is one of the biggest barriers that the non-believing younger generations, have with the church. They can't understand how God's people, the members of the church, who are trying to convert them to Christianity, don't even follow and live the beliefs of their own book, the Bible. It makes them appear very hypocritical, which is a big problem when trying to lead people to Christ. How can we expect them to believe the Word of God when many times we don't even believe it? This has also lead society to no longer view the Bible as authoritative. They now view it as just another old book full of stories that are no longer relative to them or society. This has all come to pass because the church is no longer living the Word of God; they are simply gaining knowledge of what

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<sup>9</sup> Brunson, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, Eugene. *Eat This Book: a conversation in the art of spiritual reading* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 59.

the Bible says. This has also caused many believers to lose faith in their faith. Many really doubt that God can or will do what He says in the Bible.

### **Pastors Gone Astray**

The majority of the liberalness of church doctrine that is mentioned above can be traced to pastors who are no longer preaching the whole council of God from the Bible. Some of this false teaching is due to a lack of training of the pastors who are preaching and teaching in the churches in America while some of it can be traced to the church that the preachers are serving. That might sound odd that a church could cause a preacher to go astray in his preaching, but it is true and is happening at an alarming rate. Then there are the preachers who are knowingly preaching false doctrine in order to gain financial wealth for themselves and their ministries. There are the also preachers who preach the feel good prosperity messages in order to make their congregation feel good about themselves. Whatever the reason is for their preaching one thing is for sure, it is all contrary to the Word of God.

One of the biggest problems that causes pastors to go astray today is caused by the inwardly focused churches that theses pastors serve. This also is one of the causes of pastors leaving the ministry at record numbers. This down slide starts when a preacher graduates from seminary and takes his first pastorate as a new preacher. These preachers usually leave seminary on fire for the Lord. They are trained with the latest and most up to date evangelistic and preaching methods that are available. Unfortunately many of these new preachers have mortgaged just about everything they own to spend three years

in seminary getting their education. So when they graduate many of them are carrying large amounts of debt in student loans. Also, being a new preacher they usually don't get a call from a large church that would pay them very well. They usually end up accepting a call to a smaller church that is very set in its ways. So when this new preacher arrives at his new church and wants to implement all his new styles, he is met with much resistance. He hears from his new flock that, "we don't do things like that here." They want to keep doing the things the same way they have done them for the last thirty plus years. So this new pastor is right away faced with a very serious dilemma as he starts his ministry. Does he do what he knows is right as found in the word of God and face the possibility of losing his job as pastor or does he give into the will of the people and give them what they want so he can keep his job and provide for his family.

If he does what he knows is right and he tries to use all his new training he could very likely find himself rubbing his congregation the wrong way and be voted out as pastor and asked to leave. As he weighs what to do he has to remember all the debts he has accumulated from seminary and the welfare of his family. If he loses his job how will he pay his loans and take care of his family? If he gives in to the congregation he has to struggle with not fulfilling the Word of God that he is called to preach. It is at this point that many new pastors will stick to their calling to preach the Word of God and end up leaving the church to serve God in some other field or many will become discouraged and leave the ministry for good. This is why, "1,400 pastors in America leave the ministry monthly."<sup>11</sup> Even though these pastors end up leaving the ministry they are taking a stand for God and His Word. It is the ones who stay at the churches and give in

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<sup>11</sup> Chuang, DJ. Churches closing and pastors leaving. <http://djchuang.com/2010/churches-closing-and-pastors-leaving/2010>.

to the will of their congregation, that are allowing the church to continue its downward spiral into compliancy.

Why some pastors stay at churches that have fallen into compliancy is really not within the realm of this paper, but the damage that is done to these churches does need to be looked into. Many more pastors stay at broken churches and give in to the will of their congregations, than do those who leave the ministry. Since most people want to feel good about their lives and their situations in life they want their pastors to preach sermons that tell them what great people they are. It is not uncommon to hear this message preached in churches across the world: “God wants you to be happy and enjoy your life. You deserve more, bigger, better, and faster.” We’re bombarded with the message to bow down and worship the false God of happiness.<sup>12</sup> Once the pastor starts preaching and teaching these types of messages the slippery slope only gets slipperier and steeper. This type of leadership only causes the church to become more inwardly focused on its selves. Because if the preacher says it, it must be true, this is one of the reasons the church is in such bad shape today because the members really believe that it’s all about them. However the church members many times don’t see it, they think their focus on their programs and themselves is doing kingdom work. The pastor many times does not see it either since he has given in to the will of his congregation things have gotten a lot easier for him. The people are happier, the fights have died down, and the business meetings are a breeze. In fact the church just gave the pastor a new country club membership so he can better minister to golf playing members and take a break from all his hard work. So as one can see it is often beneficial for the pastor to give in and do

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<sup>12</sup> Groeschel, 166.

what the people want whether it is right or not, because his life and ministry gets easier. Unfortunately all this does is lead to a more inwardly focused church full of people with shallow faith. Of course, this raises the question of the depth of their faith. If that many Americans have made decisions to follow Jesus, our culture and our world would be revolutionized if they simply lived that faith. It is easy to embrace a costless form of Christianity in America today, and we have probably contributed to that by giving people a superficial understanding of the gospel and focusing only on their decision to convert.<sup>13</sup> This is a prime example that the people will only do what they're taught and what they see their pastor doing. Many pastors have gotten to the point that they are modeling these self-centered behaviors to their congregations because they are no longer preaching the word of God. They don't study the word of God or go deep into the word with their sermon preparation, so they no longer live it. In the words of Walter Kiser, "Pastors have decided that using the Bible is a handicap for meeting the needs of the [different] generations; therefore they have gone to drawing their sermons from the plethora of recovery and pop-psychology books that fill our Christian bookstores. The market-forces demand that we give them what they want to hear if we wish them to return and pay for the mega-sanctuaries that we have built."<sup>14</sup> Now it becomes a matter of keeping the members happy so they stay at the church and keep tithing, because when they become unhappy and leave they take their tithe with them which can cause the church financial hardship. So when someone mentions changing back to the biblical model for doing church, it often leads to many of the fighting and church splits that are so prevalent in the

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<sup>13</sup> Kinnaman, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Platt, 47-48.

church today. Our churches begin to fight over issues that are clearly settled in the Word of God, simply because the members (and sometimes the leaders) do not know the Bible. Thus, they act on feeling and experience. Churches adopt unbiblical standards and doctrines, and no one is the wiser, because they have never discovered the truths in serious and systematic Bible study.<sup>15</sup> These are the issues and problems that have led many of our churches to program driven churches. They have to come up with new and interesting programs to keep the members coming back instead of focusing on taking the gospel to the world.

### **Program Driven Churches**

As the churches have become more inwardly focused they have realized that they now have a need to keep the current members that they have because very few if any new members are coming in. In order to keep their members happy the church has to have numerous programs available to keep everyone happy. The vast majority of these programs are focused on keeping the members that they have. Very few of these programs are focused on outreach and bringing new people into the church. If they do have outreach programs they are not going after the un-churched people groups in their cities, it will most likely be an attempt to lure unhappy members of another church to theirs. The danger of this limited focus is that church growth becomes a growth built upon the recruitment of dissatisfied church members from other congregations or denominations. One can hardly call any strategy evangelistic which does not build

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<sup>15</sup> Brunson, 178.

growth on the basis of reaching those professing no faith or affiliated with no church.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore the administration of all these programs takes countless hours of manpower and money to run them. These take people and time that could be used to reach out to the un-churched people groups in their communities. But instead we are wasting valuable time worrying about our own petty wants and desires.

The time taken to administer and run all these programs the churches has developed takes the members away from what they should be focusing on which is meeting the needs of the un-churched people in their communities. The clutter can often make things look OK, even good. The busyness is a great disguise for the lack of life. The complexity is a great cover-up. Churches can sometimes be fancy coffins.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately many members of the church let their busyness lead to false senses of security, that they are doing the Lord's work. When in reality all the time they spend administering their programs is taking them away from true work that will expand God's kingdom on earth. The time that could be spent reaching out to the lost is spent cooped up in the church trying to figure out menus and seating arrangements for the next church social. As one can see this is how the church slips into the trap of becoming more concerned about the wants and needs of the members than it does about the lost and dying people outside of its doors.

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<sup>16</sup> McSwain, Larry L. "A critical appraisal of the church growth movement." *Review @ Expositor*, 1980 77, no. 4: 521-538. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Rainer, Thom S. & Geiger, Eric. *Simple Church: Returning to God's process for making disciples* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2006), 20.



In fact this has caused many churches to be set up solely based on the needs of its members with no concern for the lost. We organize our churches as if God exists to meet our needs, cater to our comforts, and appeal to our preferences. Discussions in the church more often revolve around what we want than what he wills.<sup>18</sup> This has caused many churches to lose focus on what they are here for. It should never be about our will, we are here to fulfill God's will, it's should never be about us, but always about God's will. Unfortunately the church has become so entangled with their programs and their busy work that they think they are doing God's will. They feel they are doing a great work for the kingdom of God. But no work that only focuses on the members wants and needs and excludes the needs of the lost can be God's will. Perhaps the most telling, they cry when their needs are not met, because of their total self-centeredness. How can they even consider others when they themselves have a need for constant attention?<sup>19</sup> Many churches have become like fast-food establishments. A new idea emerges, and the menu is expanded. Someone wants a special event served a particular way, and the menu is expanded. People assume the more that can be squeezed into the menu, the better. So the brochure, the week, the calendar, the schedule, and the process get expanded, cluttered.<sup>20</sup> All of these programs and clutter just causes the church to become more inwardly focused on its members and takes away the focus on the lost and dying right outside the doors of the church. The members drive past and walk past these lost and

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<sup>18</sup> Platt, David. *Radical Together: Unleashing the people of God for the purpose of God.* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), 105.

<sup>19</sup> Brunson, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Rainer, 199.

dying souls every time they go to church but they can't see them because they're so focused on themselves.

The saddest part of the churches downfall is that the majority of the churches don't even realize that they have lost their focus. They really believe that the church is here to meet their needs. They no longer hear sermons about reaching out to the lost, helping the needy, and standing up for the helpless. To the majority of the members it's all about them and their families. Reaching the lost and helping others is the job of the professionals, the missionaries and the Para-church organizations. The church is at war with Satan for the world and we need to be on the front lines fighting the fight not cowering in the church waiting for someone else to do the fighting. The church needs to rediscover the word of God and its truths and not continue to count on our own abilities. In many churches, the preeminence of God's Word has been supplemented by man's ideas about life and leadership. Non-biblical concepts are present in our pulpits and in our leadership meetings. Too often our prayers are few, misdirected and ineffective. And we depend upon man's skills and expertise instead of upon the Word of God and leading of the Holy Spirit. We are in a supernatural war and we must depend upon the supernatural power God has given us to fight our battles.<sup>21</sup> Until the church realizes that it has lost its focus, strips away all these time consuming programs, and rediscovers its true purpose on earth it will continue on the downward spiral to mediocrity and then death.

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<sup>21</sup> Challenges facing the church in America, <http://www.iblministry.org/usachurch.htm>.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PROOF IS IN THE NUMBERS

All the talk in the world about how the church is declining due to its shift from an outwardly focused church to an inwardly focused church is worthless unless it can be supported with research. Furthermore most churches today are in denial when it comes to the topic of church growth, they don't want to believe that the church is dying a slow death until they see the numbers. Not national numbers, but local numbers, their numbers that they can't deny. These numbers are not hard to find. But once again if the churches address their declining numbers then they have to do admit they are declining. That is what it took for this author's church to see so they could face the truth, they are in a serious state of decline and if they don't make some changes they could end up closing their doors for good. That's why the vast majority of the research that has been done for this project was done in the author's local community. There are several reasons the author chose this area to do his research. The first reason is this where the author lives and ministers. This is the part of the world that the majority of his efforts will be focused in order to reach his community for Christ. As stated earlier it is important for a church to know the area it is trying to reach and minister to. The second reason this area was chosen is because it is a good example of the majority of the areas across America and what is happening to the churches in them. So the data that is used will be representative of what is happening in churches all around America and it will also be helpful for them to recognize these problems in their churches and will help them transition for inwardly focused churches that are dying to outwardly churches that are growing.

The data for this project was gathered from several different sources that will help show that the churches Southern Baptist Churches in Pittsylvania County Virginia have lost their outward focus of reaching the people in their communities for Christ. The first numbers that need to be looked at is the number of people that are living in the county and that have moved into the county over the last forty years.

Population Growth for Pittsylvania County:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>
1970	58,789
2000	61,747
2010	63,506 <sup>1</sup>

As one can see the population of Pittsylvania County has been growing over the last forty years. However the above mentioned numbers only cover the growth that was covered by the censuses for those years it does not cover the population of undocumented works that are living in the county. Pittsylvania County is largely an agrarian society so there is a large migrant worker population that is not covered by the censuses. So it is safe to say that the county's population has grown a little bigger than what the census numbers indicate. So one would assume that if the county's population is growing that the membership of the counties churches would be growing also, but unfortunately that is not the case.

Even though the population of Pittsylvania County is growing the numbers from the churches are declining across the board.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Reports, 1970, 2000, 2010.

Numbers from Pittsylvania County Baptist Churches:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Church Membership</u>	<u>Baptisms</u>	<u>Transfers</u>	<u>Churches</u>
1970	17,147	407	279	51
2010	<u>11,447</u>	<u>147</u>	<u>190</u>	<u>46<sup>2</sup></u>
	-5,700	-260	-260	-5

As one can see all the numbers from the churches have declined across the board while the population is growing. This shows that the churches are not even keeping up with the population growth of the county. For the American church to keep up with population growth, 2,900 additional new churches need to be started each year.<sup>3</sup> The numbers above indicate that in 1970 it took 42 people to lead one person to a personal relationship with Christ. Then forty years later in 2010 it took 78 people to lead one person to a personal relationship with the Christ. But if one looks a little the closer the numbers reveal an even more shocking reality. Of the 147 baptized in 2010, 92 of them were from the ages of 0 to 25, which indicate that the majority of those baptized were church member's children. This number also indicates that believers within the church are not really sharing Jesus with their children. Over forty churches with over 11,000 members in them and they are only able to lead 92 of their own children to a relationship with Jesus. This is mainly due to, "the reluctance of so many baby boomers to talk about religion or to instill their own views in their children, the prospect that their offspring will make a serious Christian commitment are even dimmer than their own prospects turned

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<sup>2</sup> Pittsylvania Baptist Association. Annual Report 1970-2010.

<sup>3</sup> Olson, David T. *The American Church in Crisis*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). 120.

out to be.”<sup>4</sup> If the parents are not even willing to talk to their own children about Jesus they certainly aren’t going to be willing to talk to strangers. Those baptized in 2010 that were above the age of 25 is only 55. That number is more representative of true outreach to the un-churched population that was lead to a personal relationship with Christ in 2010. Using that number really means it took about 208 people to lead one person to a personal relationship with Christ. Furthermore 42 of the churches in the Pittsylvania Baptist Association have gone one or more years without any baptisms. The average church in the association has a membership of roughly 275 members. The Great Commission was given to all those who are believers in Jesus so it is sad to think that churches of that size membership cannot lead at least one or more people to a relation with Christ. These numbers indicate a church that has lost its focus and are in a serious state of decline and if it is not corrected it could lead to the death of the church as we know it. It also indicates a church that has totally lost it is desire to reach out to those people in their communities that are non-believers.

These numbers also indicate that the churches in the associations have become more inwardly focused on themselves and lost their outward focus on the lost in their communities. This loss of outward focus can also be seen in the churches financial reports. On an associational level the numbers are staggering when it comes to what it cost the churches to save one soul. Just eleven years ago in 2000 the total receipts for all the churches in the association was \$7,721,827.00. The total number of baptisms for the association in 2000 was 201. So that means it cost the association \$38,417.05 to baptize

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Benton, Dean R Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens. “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline.” *First Things* 1993 no. 31: 13-18. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 7, 2011).

one soul. Just ten years later in 2010 the total receipts for all the churches in the association was \$8,602,092.00. The total number of baptisms for 2010 was 147. So in 2010 it cost the association \$58,517.63 to baptize one soul. So the cost for Pittsylvania County Baptist's to baptize one soul increased by \$20,000.00 in just ten years. How sad is it that in 2010 the associational churches took in over eight million dollars in total receipt and all they could win to the Lord with that much money was 147 people. This discrepancy in income to baptisms transfers to the local churches also. The numbers that will help substantiate this point will be from the church, Woodberry Hills Baptist Church, that the author of this papers pastors. The reason these numbers are limited to the author's church is because the majority of the other churches in the association where very reluctant to release the numbers from their budgets. But the vast majority if not all the churches in the association numbers line up very closely to the authors church. The main thing that these numbers will show is that the churches are spending more money on inwardly focused programs and very little if any money on outwardly focused programs to reach the lost in their communities. As embarrassing as it is for this author to admit his church budgeted roughly \$36,617.00 on inwardly focused programs for the church members and only \$100.00 for local outreach ministries.<sup>5</sup> These numbers support the fact that the church has not grown or reached any non-believers in Christ in 2010. It also indicates that the church is more focused inwardly on its members than it is outwardly to the lost in our community. Just to make sure that this trend is correct a survey was done of churches of all sizes in similar communities.

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<sup>5</sup> Woodberry Hills Baptist Church. Annual Budget for 2010.

A survey (appendix A) was sent out to churches that are similar to the author's church in several different communities. The main reason for the survey was to see if there is a direct correlation to a church's focus on local community outreach and church growth. The survey showed that the churches that spent more money on inwardly focused church programs are not growing. However the churches that dedicated more money to outwardly focused outreach programs are growing. So the numbers from the Pennsylvania Baptist Association, Woodberry Hills Baptist Church, and the survey indicate that inwardly focused churches are stagnate or in decline when it comes to church growth. But the churches that are focused outwardly on outreach to their local communities are growing.

However if one does not choose to believe the numbers all they have to do is visit the typical traditional church in just about any town in America and they will see a church that has an older congregation and has not experienced any substantial growth in the last ten years. As shown by the numbers above the problem of churches declining in membership cannot be corrected by adding new programs. The underlying problem of the mainline churches cannot be solved by new programs of church development alone.<sup>6</sup> The problem with church growth cannot be fixed by throwing more money and programs at the problem. The only way this problem can be fixed is if the church members get out of their comfort zone of their traditions and start reaching out to the lost in their communities. It is going to take the people of God getting out of the church and sharing the gospel through service. It is clear that the words cannot be separated from the works, as though the words were directed to the "soul" and the works were relief given to bodily

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson. 18.



ills, without there being an intimate relationship, in fact an identity between words and works. Both are signs that the Risen Lord works as he did in His life on earth. He works by speaking through the lips of His disciples and healing through their hands.<sup>7</sup> This is exactly what the traditional church today is not doing. It is not being the voice and hands of Jesus to those in their communities and that's why they are dying a slow death.

The numbers don't lie nor does the visual condition of the local churches. So if the church wants to start to grow again and reach its community and world for Christ their going to have to re-shift its focus from inwardly on itself to outwardly to the lost right outside their doors.

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<sup>7</sup> Vinay, Tullio. "Evangelism and social service." *Ecumenical Review* 1968 20, no. 2: 151-155. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 3, 2011).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SOLUTION

It is hard to believe that in the year 2011 roughly 300 years after this country was founded on religious freedoms and principles that it is now on the verge of becoming a non-Christian nation. One of the main reasons religion in America is in such bad shape is because the church has lost focus on the mission Jesus gave it to share the gospel with the world. So far this paper has discussed how the church has gotten to this state, how it has become so inwardly focused on itself that it has lost its desire to fulfill its mission of reaching out to those around the church and world who need Jesus. Now it is time to look at how the church can rediscover its first love which is to serve Jesus and reach out to those around them with the good news of Jesus before it is too late. Because if the church does not make some changes and rediscover its mission to take the gospel to the nation and world it could result in the continued decline in membership and possibly end of the church as we know it.

The main problem with the church in America today is that it has become very much like a naval battle group with an aircraft carrier at its center. A carrier battle group is made up of a lot ships that help protect the carrier and keep her supplied. Then there is the aircraft carrier itself, it is huge, and it cannot turn on a dime. It takes a lot of ocean and coordination to turn a battle group around. The church in America is the same way it has become so big with so many layers that it can't turn around very easily or quickly. In theory it is easy, the church just needs to get back to the basics of the gospel and become doers of the word of God. But in reality the church is like a huge battle group that is off

course, it is going take a lot of time, work, and room to get it turned around and back on the right course.

### **Getting Back to the Basics**

As easy as it sounds for the church to get back to the basics of biblical Christianity in reality it will not be very easy. The church has gotten so far off course and has left so many people behind and hurting that it will take a lot of time and work to get the church back on course. This inwardly focused stance that the church has taken has caused it to become very callused to people who are just outside its doors and need Jesus the most. Furthermore these people groups that the church has neglected and left behind realize that the church has neglected them. So not only does the church have to regain the trust of the people groups they have neglect over the years they also have to take a hard look internally at how they have been doing church. Because as it has been pointed out in previous chapters that the church has become so self-centered with all its focus on its members and programs that they have forgotten about those outside of the church who desperately need Jesus. Even though the church is doing some good it has to become better at using what God has given it. David Platt makes a great point in his book, *Radical Together* where he says, “I simply and humbly want to ask this question, “Amid all the good things we are doing and planning, are there better ways to align God’s Word, mobilize God’s people, and marshal God’s resources for God’s glory in a world where millions of people are starving and more than a billion have never even

heard of Jesus?’”<sup>1</sup> The church has to become better at doing the word of God and the best place for the church to rediscover its first love and rediscover how to do what God has called them to do, is in His Word, the Bible. The church needs to return to the word of God and read it with new fresh eyes and rediscover what it has to say about how we are supposed to live and serve those around us.

This will not be an easy task because the church and its members have been so focused on themselves for so many years that they have forgotten why they are here. All these years of being inwardly focused has caused the church to lose focus on its true mission which is to reach out to those in their communities and the world with the gospel of Christ. This means they will have to rediscover the sections of the Bible that they have ignored or not taken seriously in the past. They will have to rediscover the truths of the Bible. They will have to rediscover that it is not about self, it is about service, it is about becoming servants for the cause of Christ. The only way the church can do this is to return to the word of God and do what it tells us to do, not what we want it to say. This will require God’s people to read the Bible with fresh eyes and open hearts. It will require them to read in such a way that the words and text will change their lives. Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.<sup>2</sup> One has to read the Word of God in way that it lets the word truly changes them. They can no longer read for the sake of knowledge they need to read for the sake of changing their lives. What is really lacking? Knowledge is not

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<sup>1</sup> Platt, David. *Radical Together: Unleashing the people of God for the purpose of God*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, Eugene. *Eat this book: A conversation in the art of spiritual reading*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 28.

lacking; obedience is. Christians in America are already educated beyond their obedience, and more education is not the solution.<sup>3</sup> The church and its members need to rediscover the changing power of the Word of God. They need to return to the basics and allow the Word of God help them rediscover the mission that Jesus gave the church in the Great Commission.

### **What the Bible Has to Say**

As with any under taking of the church and its members the Word of God must be they're sole guide as they seek to do God's will. The Bible is the guide book for the church, all that the church does has to square with the Bible or it is in violation of God's will. When it comes to believing and following the Word of God it is an all or nothing deal. One cannot pick and choose certain section of the Bible that they want to believe, one hast to accept and follow all of it. The Bible is the final revelation that the church has from God so it is very important that the church follows every word of it. The say that the last words that man utters are very important in fact many times the family is called in to hear them and many times they are recorded for prosperities sake. In fact that is where we get the phrase, "famous last word," from. The reason the church is in such sad shape today is because it has strayed from the last words of God. Many in the church have become selective in the parts and passages of the Bible that they want to believe. However if the church wants to rediscover its first love and fulfill the mission that Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> Cole, Neil. *Organic Church: Growing faith where life happens*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 151.

gave it it will have to return to God's word, all of it not just part of it. Peterson said, "What I want to call attention to is that the Bible, all of it, is *livable*; it is *the* text for living our lives."<sup>4</sup>

So what does the Word of God have to say that can help the church rediscover its mission to reach the world with the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? If one believes what is said about the importance of last words, let us look at some of the last words that Jesus spoke to His believers. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus gives His followers the Great Commission, "Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> Jesus is very clear in what He is telling his followers, the church. He is telling them to go to all the nations (people groups) and tell them the good news of the Gospel. He did not tell them to sit around and develop programs that will draw the people to the church, he told the church to go to the people. Too many people in the church today feel that Jesus is just mentioning another Spiritual gift that someone might have or that this is for professionals like pastors and missionaries, but it's not. This is not Jesus telling his followers about a Spiritual gift, He is giving them a commandment to go and take the Gospel to the world. Not only can someone's last words be important so can their first words because they can set the tone for the mission. In Matthew 4:19 Jesus call's his disciples, "Jesus called out to them, 'Come follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!'"<sup>6</sup> In this verse, "Come

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:19 (NLT)

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 4:19 (NLT)

follow me,” it is an adverb, used when two or more are addressed.<sup>7</sup> So Jesus is talking to multiple people when He says this and He is still calling us to come and follow Him still. Jesus is not saying when one want’s to or when one gets time, He means right now. In this verse it gets the force of an interjection, "Come! Come now!"<sup>8</sup> The church needs to rediscover these words of Jesus. He not only calls us to come and follow Him, He also commands us to go and take the gospel to the world.

So as one can see Jesus is very serious about His followers, who are the church, are to spread the good news to the world. He reminds us that the key focus of the church’s mission is not the church but the world.<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ focus for the church has always been the world and never the church itself. In fact Jesus sent out His twelve disciples and later sent seventy-two disciples to take the good news to those around them. So it is hard to understand how the church today can mistake Jesus teaching for anything but what it is, to go and take the gospel to the world. It makes one wonder how the church today has interpreted Jesus’ teaching on this topic to mean sit within the safety of the church and wait for the people of the world to come to them. The message of Jesus has always been for the church to go to the people and share the good news with them. The world today in 2011 is not going to come to the church; it does not trust the church therefore the church is going to have to go to them just as Jesus commanded them to do. Again the church has to follow the example of Jesus. He did not sit in the synagogue and what for the people to come to him, no he and his disciple traveled all throughout the area of

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<sup>7</sup> Thayer's Greek Lexicon, PC Study Bible formatted Electronic Database. Copyright © 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Sweet, Leonard. *Aqua Church 2.0: Plotting your church in today’s fluid culture*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 68.

Palestine sharing the Good News and healing people. Jesus also taught some other valuable lesson that the church has decided not to follow.

Jesus is also very clear on how his disciples and followers should live their lives while they are carrying the gospel to the world. One of the things that Jesus talks quite a bit about in the gospels is the cost of becoming a believer and following Him. Jesus is very clear that it will cost one everything to follow him, it is an all or nothing deal, we are either all in or all out. In fact in the fourteenth chapter of Luke when Jesus is talking about counting the cost to follow Him, He says in verse 33, “So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.”<sup>10</sup> As one reads the gospels in the New Testaments one will recall that Jesus disciples did exactly that they gave up their businesses and left their jobs to follow Jesus. They gave up everything they had worked so hard to get to follow Jesus. They were willing to walk away from all their worldly possessions to follow Jesus and help spread the Good News to the rest of world. Then there was also Paul who gave up everything to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. After his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road Paul gave up everything he had and dedicated the rest of his life to spreading the good news about Jesus. In fact almost all of Jesus’ disciples after they gave everything up went on to be beaten, imprisoned, and most of them where martyred all so they could spread the gospel. So one has to ask, how does the church today interpret Jesus teaching on giving up our worldly possession to follow him as accumulating stuff that clutters our lives and living in luxury? The average church member in America today lives like a king compared to the rest of the world. Our house are heated and air conditioned, our refrigerators are full

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 14:33 (NLT).



of food, and our cars are even air conditioned as we ride around in comfort, and our animals even live in luxury. We live in comfort and grandeur as people across town from us and people around the world go hungry and sleep outside because they can't afford to do anything else. This brings us to the next topic that Jesus was very adamant about, that the church today has neglected to keep up with, which is taking care of those who are less fortunate than they are.

Taking care of the less fortunate and those who have been neglected by society was another topic that Jesus was very clear about. The church and its members are to reach out to and help take care of these people groups instead of focusing on themselves and their needs. In fact Jesus told his disciples in Mark 9:35, "He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to him, and said, 'Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.'"<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus goes on to tell the rich young ruler to sell everything he has and give it away to the poor. Again Jesus is very clear on how He expects his followers to treat the less fortunate in our society. Jesus even said in Matthew 25:40, "And the king will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you are doing it to me!'"<sup>12</sup> Jesus is talking about helping the less fortunate here; when we help them we are really helping Jesus. How much clearer does get, that we as Christ followers are supposed to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Again one has to ask, how has the church and her members interpreted these teachings of Jesus to mean that they live in prosperity while those around us live in poverty? However many in the church in America have the attitude of out of site out of

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<sup>11</sup> Mark 9:35 (NLT).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 12:33 (NLT).

mind, if they don't see the poor and helpless then they don't exist. Platt makes a great statement in his book *Radical*, "I have practically ignored these people, and I have been successful in my ignorance because they are not only poor but also powerless. Literally millions of them are dying in obscurity, and I have enjoyed my affluence while pretending they don't exist."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately this is not the attitude of one man; this is the attitude of the majority of the believers in America today. They don't go to those parts of town so they don't see the poor and needy. When the commercials come on TV about the poor and needy they change channels. They don't think these things happen in America, especially in their home towns, so they are content to just ignore them. The whole thought of believers living in luxury with no sacrifice is contrary and foreign to the teachings of Jesus. Believers need to be willing to give up some of their luxuries in order to help those who are less fortunate than they are. Chan makes a great statement in his book *Crazy Love*, "The concept of downsizing so that others might upgrade is biblical, beautiful...and nearly unheard of. We either close the gap or don't take the words of the Bible literally."<sup>14</sup> Jesus was about closing the gap, therefore that is what His followers need to be about, closing the gap through giving things up in order to spread the gospel.

As one can see by the above mentioned teachings of Jesus and the New Testament that His followers need to get out of the church and go to the people. How the church today has turned Jesus message of going and helping the less fortunate into sitting in the church and looking out for themselves is unfathomable. It is not going to be easy; it is not going to be safe, in fact it could cost one his or her life. In fact Jesus reminds us time

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<sup>13</sup> Platt, David. *Radical: Taking back your faith from the American Dream*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 109.

<sup>14</sup> Chan, Francis. *Crazy Love*. (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 2008), 121.

and time again that his followers will be ridiculed, hated, persecuted, and families will be torn apart. But if we call ourselves believers and followers of Jesus Christ we have no choice but to believe, follow, and live out his word, we have to do it.

### **Some Changes Will Need to be Made**

If the church in America wants to rediscover her first love and start to fulfill the mission that Jesus gave us then it will have to start with how believers live. Believers will need to start living a lifestyle that resembles the teachings of Jesus, a lifestyle that resembles Jesus'. This is one of the major barricades that stop non-believers from associating with believers; believers don't live like their bible tells them to live. John Wesley said back in the eighteenth century that the "grand stumbling block" to the credibility of the gospel was "the lives of Christians."<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately when it comes to "the lives of Christians" things have only gotten worse since the eighteenth century. If the church expects to regain the trust of the people outside of the church they will need to start with how they live. For too long the country has heard the church say one thing but live another way. The church and its members need to align their way of life so it matches what they say so they are the same if they want the people of the world to start to believe them.

One of the first things that believers are going to have to do to show the world that they are living the word of God is to get outside of the safety of the church. For too long the church has stayed within safety of the four walls of the church, they circled the

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<sup>15</sup> Sweet, 51.

wagons and are afraid to come outside. Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin is an outstanding preacher, but he believes that ministry is always what happens outside the church. In his words, “If you are not making an impact outside of your four walls, then you are not making an impact at all.” He challenges those he mentors by asking them, “If you picked up and left, how would the city feel? Would the city weep? Would anybody even notice? Would anybody care?”<sup>16</sup> This is the problem with the majority of the churches today; they do not do hard self-examination and ask themselves the tuff questions. If they don’t ask them, they don’t have to answer them. They just keep on thinking things are fine. The majority of the churches today need to ask themselves these same question and prepare themselves for the answers, because unfortunately the majority of the city’s wouldn’t even notice or care if the churches has left. So the believers need to leave the church building and go out to the people, they need to cross the street and help the people who are right outside their doors who need Jesus. The church has to partake in the life of the community in which it is located. It has to let the community know that it cares and wants to help everyone who needs help not just a select few. Jesus insists on participation. Jesus dismisses the scholar with a command, “Go and do...” Live what you read. We read the Bible in order to live the word of God.<sup>17</sup> The church needs to rediscover the joy of participating in the life of its community.

The church and its members have to get out of the church and rediscover the joy of helping others face to face. They need to rediscover the feeling of joy they get when they lead someone to Christ. Too often believes have reduced their helping of others to

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<sup>16</sup> Rusaw, Rick & Swanson, Eric. *The externally focused church*. (Loveland: Group, 2004), 141

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, 84.

writing a check or dropping some money in the plate for the special mission offering. I was immediately reminded that when God chose to bring salvation to you and me, he did not send gold or silver, cash or check. He sent himself—the Son...If we are going to accomplish the global purpose of God, it will not be primarily through giving our money, as important as that is. It will happen primarily through giving ourselves. This is what the gospel represents, and it's what the gospel requires.<sup>18</sup> This is what it is all about, getting out and doing the word of God. The church can no longer sit around in its beautiful comfortable building and wait for the people to come to them, they have to get out and go to the people. This author feels that the next great revival in America will come through service, not through giving or words. The people in America and the world need to see and feel Jesus, not just hear about him. Likewise the followers of Christ need to be his hands and feet to the world. There is nothing as exciting as helping someone and then look into their eyes and hold their hand and feel the joy they get to experience because someone helped them. Once the members of the church experience this love and joy they will become addicted to helping others and leading them to Christ. But they can't experience these feelings until they get outside of the safety of the church. It is scary to leave ones comfort zone and venture out into the unknown. The work could be hard and not everyone will accept their help, it can even be dangerous, but it is not about us it is about them and it is what Jesus has commanded us to do. The work that Jesus has called his followers to do cannot be accomplished by simply writing a check out to the church. It will take believers getting out and going to the people. Money is such a small part of ourselves that it cannot wholly discharge our Christian obligation of

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<sup>18</sup> Chan, 198.

service in the world: rather, we must offer the far more precious giving of self-entailed in face-to-face compassion – the sharing of suffering – with those who need *us*, not just our money or our institutions.<sup>19</sup> In order for believers to make the time to do this compassionate face-to-face giving of themselves will mean they will have to make some changes in how they live. This type of giving will require that believers learn to live a more sacrificial lifestyle.

In order for believers to be able to reach out to those around them that need Christ they will have to be willing to give up some of the creature comforts that they have developed over time. They will not only have to sacrifice their comfort but also sacrifice themselves. The key word here, again, is *sacrifice*. The challenge is not just to give away excess stuff that you really don't need anyway. That's not sacrifice. Sacrifice is giving away what it hurts to give. Sacrifice is not giving according to your ability; it's giving beyond your ability.<sup>20</sup> Think how much one could accomplish for Christ if they lived this way, if they stripped away all the un-needed stuff out their lives. They would have more time and resources that could be used to really accomplish great things for Christ. Again that is what it is all about, serving other, not ourselves. There is nothing more than anyone in the world wants than to be loved by someone else. To have someone who loves them no matter what, someone who will not abandon them when things get tuff. This type of relationship cannot be developed at a distance. This type of relationship is developed up close and face-to-face. When we put ourselves in the position of servants, God provides opportunities for ministry. Sometimes we want to

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<sup>19</sup> Kelley, Dean M. "The church and the poverty program." *Christian Century* 1996 83, no. 23: 741-744. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 31, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Platt, 109.

help people without getting too close to them. But to show and model love, we have to get close to those we serve, even when it isn't comfortable or clean.<sup>21</sup> In order to get close to the needy, does that mean one sells their nice big home in the suburbs and move into an apartment in the inner city? Does that mean ones sells their nice loaded out SUV, both of them, and buy one very cheap used car so they can give more money to the needy? Does that mean that one gets rid of all the extra stuff in their life that takes time away from Kingdom work? These are tuff questions to answer, but if one is a born again believer in Jesus Christ, the stuff has to go. Unfortunately in the church today people who do these kinds of things are considered weird or crazy and looked down upon. Chan proves this in his book *Crazy Love*, "When I returned from my first trip to Africa, I felt strongly that we were to sell our house and move into something smaller, in order to give more away. The feedback I got was along the lines of 'It's not fair to your kids,' 'It's not a prudent financial choice,' and 'You are doing it just for show.' I do not remember a single person who encouraged me to explore it or supported the decision at the time...My response to the cynics, in the context of eternity, was, am I the crazy one for selling my house? Or are *you* for not giving more, serving more, being with your Creator more?<sup>22</sup> Again the answer to the question of how much should one get rid of is not an easy one. But if one calls themselves a follower of Christ the answer is clear, we have to start getting rid of all the stuff in our lives that are hindering us from serving Christ. The less clutter a Christian has in their lives the less they will be distracted from living the gospel as Christ has called them to do.

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<sup>21</sup> Rusaw, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Chan, 135.

The church and its members need to make some major changes in how they live if they want to reach the world for Christ as they have been commanded to do. The only thing the world knows about the church is what it sees its members doing and saying and if our lifestyle is not the same as what the Bible says they will see it. Consider the rise of the Christians during the Roman era. People were drawn to Christians, not because of evangelistic outreaches or crusades, or through mass media--those didn't exist. The church grew because Christians were *doing* the gospel and had a community—a local church—where people really loved each other.<sup>23</sup> It's not about knowing the gospel, it's not about sitting in a pew a couple hours a week, it always has and always will be about doing the gospel. That's what Jesus did; He went from town to town, helping people, healing people, and changing lives. Shouldn't we do the same? If we want to reach our communities and the world for Christ we're going to have to change how we live and act. This will be one of the first steps the church and its members will have to take in order to help regain the trust of the people so they can then share the gospel with them.

### **Regain the Trust of the People**

If the church wants to change the lives of the people in their communities and get them to listen to them they are going to have to regain the trust of the people. The churches inwardly focus on itself and its lack of concern for those on the outside has caused many people to no longer trust the church. Also the churches narrow minded judgmental view of all those outside the church has also hurt their reputation among the

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<sup>23</sup> Kinnaman, David & Lyons, Gabe. *Unchristian: what a new generation really thinks about Christianity...and why it matters*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 87.



un-saved. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.<sup>24</sup> How sad is that the very people that the church is supposed to be reaching out to and loving unconditionally feel rejected by Christians. Unfortunately these people did not develop these feeling and views overnight. These views and feelings of non-believers were developed over years and years of rejection and ignoring by the church and its members. As one knows one of the hardest things in the world to do is to regain someone's trust after it has been lost or betrayed. So this will be no easy task for the church to accomplish but it must be done if the church wants to truly change the world for Christ. One of the most important things the church will need to do to start regaining trust will be to start investing in the lives of those outside the church.

In order to start regaining the trust of the people the church and its members will have to do what Jesus did in ministry which was to invest in the lives of the lost. Disciple making is not about a program or an event but about a relationship. As we share the gospel, we impart life, and this is the essence of making disciple.<sup>25</sup> When a relationship is developed with someone a bond is developed that is not easily broken. That person feels loved and cared for, like they are important. That's what it is all about developing relationships with people and as we do this it will open the door to share the gospel with them. The key is not to give up on them if they don't accept the gospel the first time it is shared with them. It might take two, three, it might even take thirty times, no matter how long it takes we must never stop loving them. Unfortunately that's what has happened in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Platt, 96.

the past when believers would befriend someone and witness to them if that non-believer didn't accept Christ the believer would drop them like a hot potato and never have anything to do with them again. That makes the non-believer feel like they were never cared for just used. Reaching out to the lost is all about developing relationships. If we were to study the primary reason churches fail, we might discover that they've failed in one area they should be good at—building, sustaining, and cultivating relationships.<sup>26</sup> The best way for the church to get better at relationships will be to get better at investing in people.

As the church and its members attempt to reach out to people and invest in their lives, in order to regain their trust, they will need to be careful to not just reach out to people like themselves. Too often churches will only reach out to people like themselves, well mannered, white middle class families. This will often result in them luring away members of other churches that are un-happy with their church or who are just looking for the next new thing. But this is not reaching the world for Christ this is simply shuffling the deck. Believers are going to have to reach out to those people groups who may not look like them, or act like them. They might be the people that are on the fringe of society, but they are still important to God. They will also be the ones that are the least trusting of all the people groups because they have been abused, mistreated, and rejected by everyone they come in contact with. So again believers are going to have to get out of their comfort zones to regain the trust of these people. However once they do and they see the change it can make in a person's life and the joy it can bring, they will be changed also. Again if believers return to the word of God and rediscover the love He

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<sup>26</sup> Rusaw, 93.

has for them and the relationship he wants with them, they should want to develop the same type of relationships with everyone in their community. Developing relationships is the key to regaining the trust of non-believers. It's not giving them things or feeding them every now and then, it's loving them and investing in their lives. As important as it is for the church to regain the trust and love of the people groups who have been neglected and forgotten the group they really need to be reaching out to is the young people.

The hardest people group that the church will encounter on its quest to regain the trust of the people will be the youth of their communities. It is very hard to gain the trust of young people today whether they are in America or not. In their life time they have been let down by so many people in their lives that they find it hard to trust anyone. They have been let down and lied to by their parents, sport heroes, teachers, government leaders, and even church leaders. This is a generation that has learned that seeing is believing, don't tell me, show me by your actions. Don't tell me Jesus loves me, show me Jesus loves me. Unfortunately the church is one organization that young people trust the least because of what the church has shown them. In our national survey we found the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are anti-homosexual (an image held by 91 percent of young outsiders), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent)...*This is what a new generation really thinks about Christianity.*<sup>27</sup> How sad is it that this is how young people view the church? They don't see it as a place of love and compassion that they can turn to in a time a need, but a place that is judgmental and cannot be trusted. Young people today are all about caring and reaching out to people

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<sup>27</sup> Kinnaman, 27.

who need help. They are probably the most open and caring generation so far. They fight for fairness and equality for everyone and they are willing to help those who are in need whether they are in America or half way around the world. In fact they are acting more like the church than the church does. Young adults are turning away from a modern church that they see as nothing more than hypocritical. Standards and rules without sacrifice and solidarity is hypocrisy. Christian rhetoric without tangible acts of love is hypocrisy. Churches on every corner with hurting people outside is hypocrisy. A large building with little connection to the streets is essentially empty.<sup>28</sup> So the church is really going to have to make some changes in how it does business if it wants to regain the trust of the young people.

The reason it is so important for the church to regain the trust of the young people is because they are the future of the church. If the church does not reach out to the young people and get them back into the church, the church could cease to exist as we know it in one generation. It's also important that church reach the young people in order to keep them in the church. The earlier in life that a person becomes a believer in Jesus Christ the less likely they are to leave the faith when they get older. It also helps them develop a stronger foundation of faith that will help them through the hard times in life that they will face. There is no way around the fact that the young people are the future of the church. The church can no longer sit around and hope that the young people will come to their senses when they get older and come to church. The church needs to go after them and regain their trust if they want to get them to become believers.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 65.

There is nothing more the people in the world want today than somebody or something that they can trust. They want someone to for once do what they say they will do and not have to worry about the small print. When someone says they love them they want to be loved. When someone says they will help them they want to be helped. When someone says they will feed them they want to be fed. This is what the church should be doing. The church and its members should be the most trusted people in the world, not viewed as judgmental and hypocritical. So if the church wants to reach out to the people of the world and lead them to Christ, they're going to have regain their trust.

### **More Than Just Professionals**

In order for the church to reach their communities and the world for Christ they are going to have to get all its members involved and not leave it up to the paid professionals. As one reads through the gospels and the other books in the New Testament one will see that Jesus called everyday people to be his followers and help him spread the good news. Jesus did not go to the universities and get learned scholars nor did he go to the local synagogue and get all the preachers to help him spread the good news. No, Jesus went and got common everyday people to help him change the world. He got fisherman, tax collectors, and a bunch of unknowns to take the good news to the world. So why do the church members today feel that evangelism and outreach should be left up to the professional preachers, missionaries, and evangelist? Platt makes a great observation, "Let us not be so unwise as to bank the spread of the gospel on a certain person at a certain place when all week long the Spirit of God is living in every single

man and woman of God, empowering each of us to advance the kingdom of God for his glory.<sup>29</sup> That's just simple math why count on the pastor to advance the kingdom of God by himself when he only sees a few visitors on Sunday when all the members see hundreds of people six days a week. Yet very few of the churches members do any outreach at all they leave it all up to the professionals.

One of the reasons that church members do not do outreach is they feel that outreach is a Spiritual gift and they don't have that gift. But the Last Commandment was just that a commandment to all of Jesus followers, not an addition to the list of spiritual gifts. Jesus is not going to give us a commandment to do something if he is not going to give us the tools to carry it out. Sweet says, "Gods doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called."<sup>30</sup> All church members are called to spread the gospel therefore God will equip them to share the gospel. Many times believers make sharing the gospel much harder than it really is. It is not a matter of memorizing large blocks of scripture and complex formulas; it can be as simple as telling someone about what Jesus has done for them. Nor is it as hard as going up to strangers or knocking on strangers doors and asking them if they know Jesus. If one is living a Spirit filled life and reaching out to those around them it will make evangelism easy, because the people being helped will ask the helper. They will ask, why are you helping me, why are you being nice to me, and why are you feeding me? Then the believer tells them because this is what Jesus told me to do. The church and its members again have to stop waiting for someone else to reach out to those in need and do what each and every one of them is commanded to do,

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<sup>29</sup> Platt, 70.

<sup>30</sup> Sweet, 254.

help those who need helping. Chan made it very clear in his book *Crazy Love*, “I doubt if people even considered these questions back in Jesus’ day! Is this idea of the non-fruit-bearing Christian something that we have concocted in order to make Christianity “easier”? So we can follow our own course while still calling ourselves followers of Christ?”<sup>31</sup> How can one call themselves a follower of Christ and not bear fruit? That’s just the point one cannot call themselves a follower of Christ and not bear fruit. The church and its members need to stop taking the easy way out and leaving the work up to the professionals and get out themselves and start bearing some fruit.

There are is no way around the fact that the members of the church need to quit making excuses and get out of the church and take the gospel to their communities and then the world. That is what they are commanded to do by our Lord and Savior, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations...”<sup>32</sup> If believers don’t start doing what they have been called to do, I don’t know how the church will survive much longer. No one wants to think that it could happen but at the rate churches are closing and clergy are leaving the ministry it could very well happen. Believers cannot leave it up to the professionals to do all the heavy lifting when it comes to outreach. Everyone regardless of their age needs to do their part when it comes to outreach.

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<sup>31</sup> Chan, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 25:29 (NLT).

## CHAPTER SIX

### IMPLIMENTATION OF THE SOLUTION

So far this paper has covered the topics that deal with how the church has lost its focus on the mission given to it by Christ and its desire to fulfill that mission. It has also looked at the problem which is the churches inward focus on itself and its members and the lack of concern for those outside of the church who it has been commissioned to show compassion to and share Jesus with. It then looked at how the church has declined from a growing vibrant church in the book of Acts in the New Testament to the dying institution that it is today. It has also addressed the solution to how the church can rediscover its first love; the love of God and his word, and how it can rediscover the mission it was given by Christ. Now that the problem has been identified and a sound biblical solution to the problem has also been identified it is time to look at how the solution can be implemented so the church can move forward and continue to accomplish its mission.

One would think that this would be an easy fix for the church. Unfortunately the church is so far off course that it will take a lot of work and a lot time to get the church back on the right course. There are several reasons this will not be such an easy task. One of the main reasons is that the church is so stepped in traditions and rituals that they think these traditions and rituals are spiritual. They feel that by going through the motion like the first century Jew's, who were so caught up in their traditions that they missed the Messiah. So this means the church today will need to be reprogramed with the word and the will of God. It is hard to believe that the church that is founded on the word of God needs to be re-taught the word so they can fulfill its mission on earth. Another thing the church will need to do will be to evaluate all of their programs to see why they do them



and what are they trying to accomplish with them. This will be hard because many of the programs seem to be a good uses of their resources and time but when looked at closely they are inwardly focused for their member and have no outreach qualities. They will also have to get their membership involved in doing ministry. The church can no longer count on the trained and paid clergy to reach the world with the gospel. It will take every member living and sharing the gospel if the church wants to reach the world. The church will also have to replace their inwardly focused programs with programs that are focused on reaching out to those outside of the church, programs for those who don't know Jesus. Basically the church needs to start living the gospel as Christ and the other New Testament believers did. The church needs to get out of their safety zones and love those who need to be loved. Again this will be a long hard road for the church to travel because there is no organization that hates change and fights change like the church. The unfortunate fact is that if they don't change they will die.

### **Deprogram and Reprogram**

It would be easy to understand how the church has strayed from its original mission if it was some complex formula that was hard to understand and difficult for the average person to carry out. But the gospel and the mission of taking it to the world is very easy and it is something that everyone can do. So why has the church gotten so far off course? One of the main reasons is that it has become caught up with programs that are focused inwardly on them. Every era has its own characteristics. Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found

among us. In its stead are programs, methods, organizations and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all.<sup>1</sup> The church today has let programs and busy work take the place of outreach. The church has been doing this for so long now that they have placed their programs and business in front of reaching out to the needy and lost. They feel that all their work is working for God. Even though all their efforts are focused inward and no one outside of the church is being reached they still think they are busy with Kingdom work. This constant inward focus of the church is one of the mind sets that need to be broken. The gospel is not to be only inwardly focused, but outwardly directed as well. The early church understood that the message of Jesus was to spread to every country, people group, family, and individual in the world.<sup>2</sup> So one of the first things the church will have to do if it wants to survive is shift its view from inward to outward.

In order for the church to make this shift from an inward focus to an outward focus they will first have to be shown just how non-biblical their current stance is. This will be a very difficult task because the church has not changed how it operates for about a hundred years, nor has its view on outreach changed either. If the institution of the church has gone this long with this much tradition that has not changed very much in an ever changing world it will not change overnight. Even when it is shown that what they

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<sup>1</sup> Tozer, A.W. *The Pursuit of God*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Olson, David. *The American church in crisis*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 130.

are doing is non-biblical many times they still refuse to accept the truth. For instance one of these issues is the day and the time of the service. The vast majority of the churches feel that there has to be a Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night prayer meeting and they all need to be held at the church. Those who don't attend all three meetings faithfully are very often looked down on for not being very spiritual or committed to the faith. But as one looks to the New Testament and Jesus' teachings he went to where the people were at. He traveled from village to village ministering to the people he did not sit in the synagogue and wait for the people to come to him. Nor did Jesus teach that the synagogue was the only place that ministry could be done. As one looks around at our diverse world and all the demands placed on people just to survive not everyone can come to the church for services. So the church needs to return to the biblical model of evangelism and get out of the church and go to the people whenever and wherever they can meet. The only thing the church likes to control more than when and where they meet is their order of service.

The order of service that most traditional churches in America follow has not changed in over a hundred years. The prayers, the music, and the secret Christian language that they speak has not changed one bit. Therefore if an un-churched person were to visit one of these churches they would feel like they had just entered a time machine and went back in time. Because nothing they hear during the service sounds like anything they hear outside of the service in their everyday lives. This causes people to feel very uncomfortable and out of place in these types of churches and people will not return to a church if they feel uncomfortable and don't understand what's going on. But instead of changing their service to make the un-churched visitor feel more comfortable

the church looks down on them for not coming to church more often so they will know what's going on and know how they should act. Unfortunately many of these church would rather close their doors and go under than change. The reason for this is because they feel that their ridged services are spiritual. They feel they are doing something big for God by coming in and going through the motions every time the church doors are open. Their inward focus also has them believe that the service is all about them and what they like and want and if the visitors don't like it they should just keep on looking somewhere else for a church. But what this really is, is legalism. The churches following a strict set of rules so they can feel more spiritual. So why do churches continue to follow these traditions when they know that they are contrary to the word of God?

Many churches continue to stick to their tradition for the simple fact that it relieves them from going out doing ministry. If they come to church and follow the rules and go through the motions of worship they are being good Christians. By doing that they are doing their part for God so why should they go out and help the poor, the needy, and those who need Christ. Since they are doing their part someone else can go out and do the dirty work of ministry. Someone else can go out and hangout with the dirty sinners while they stay in the safety of the church. Consider the people at your church. Do the strong and active members minister to society's "outcast," or do they use them as illustrations for their own superiority? Do they ignore those who have sinned and made poor choices, or do they embrace them? *Our Lord is the God of second chances. Many*

*of our fellowships are churches of the first strike.*<sup>3</sup> The church needs to break the bonds of traditions so it can return to their mission of helping the needy and not judging the needy.

Another reason why so many traditional churches today have become so dysfunctional is because they are restrained from doing anything by their own by-laws, constitutions, and covenants. Some of these documents are fifty plus pages telling the members how they are to do church, who can be a member, who can do what, and what committees are in charge of what. It is important to have some sense of order within any organization, but the church has taken this to a whole new level. Many churches hold their manmade rules on the same level a scripture. Others use their rules and regulations to control the church and manipulate the membership. Then when they don't have a church rule to cover a certain situation they will fall back on *Robert's Rules of Order*. The best thing a church can do that is serious about reaching the lost for Christ would be to through all those rules and regulations out the nearest window. The church has allowed these documents to stifle the Holy Spirit from moving or working within the church. When every there is a need in the church the committee responsible for that area needs to meet, then make a recommendation to the church. Then depending on the recommendation the church might have to call a special business meeting to vote on the recommendation. The special called business meeting will need to be announced from the pulpit and placed in the bulletin at least two weeks before the meeting. Then at the time of the meeting they will have to see how many members are present to make sure they have quorum so they can vote on the recommendation. From start to finish that

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<sup>3</sup> Brunson Mac & Caner Ergun. *Why Churches Die: Diagnosing lethal poisons in the body of Christ*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2005), 124.

could take several weeks to make a decision that should have been made on the spot. One has to wonder where the church came up with this model of governance. One thing is for certain it is not scriptural. When it comes to business the church functions more like a corporation than it does the body of Christ who is commissioned to reach out to a dying world. Then they wonder why no one wants to come and worship with them. They don't come because they want a break from corporate America and all its problems that's what they deal with every day. The church has to change the way it functions or it will die. It needs to reexamine some of its traditions it has held onto for the last hundred years and get rid of the ones that are hindering its mission. Much of what leaders in the church are trying to do have so long passed its use-by date that it's a wonder anybody is left to lead. If nothing in your ministry has changed in the past year, you're not keeping up. Some Christians have minds that haven't changed in fifty years. Not even rocks stay that still. Every day, it seems, the world changes without church leaders being aware of it or caring enough to take note.<sup>4</sup> The church has to realize that it has to change, but first it has to care enough about others to be willing to change. If it does not change the church could be facing extinction. Extinction occurs most often when a species faces a crisis or change in its environment and is unable to adapt.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the church is no different.

Once the church has de-programed itself of all its bad habits and traditions that are no longer useful it will need to reprogram itself to accomplish its mission. What needs to happen to the church is very much like United States Marine Corps boot camp.

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<sup>4</sup> Sweet, Leonard. *Aqua Church 2.0*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 302.

<sup>5</sup> Olson, 118.

When a new Marine Corps recruit arrives at boot camp he will go through a dramatic change. They often go in undisciplined lazy teenagers and come out a well-disciplined fighting machine that is the best in the world at what he does. The Marine Corps accomplishes this by stripping away all the recruits' bad habits and old ways then rebuilds them in the Marine Corps way and it works. The Marine Corps has been our nation's 911 force for well over two hundred years. This is what needs to happen to the church once all its bad habits and traditions have been stripped away they need to reprogram themselves to their original biblical standards.

### **Evaluation of Church Programs**

Now that the church has gone through and rid itself of all the tradition and bad habits that have hurt it and hindered it from growing for the last thirty years, it now needs to evaluate all of the programs that it operates within the church. So many churches today are over whelmed by their many programs and activities they have to offer to their members. Many of these programs and activities were started many years ago when the church was doing good and had plenty of members to support and run the programs. Unfortunately as time has passed and the membership has fallen off to the point it has become a struggle to keep all the programs running. These programs have become just like the traditions mentioned above that the church has held onto with a death grip. They feel they need to keep doing them because they have always done them. Some churches have tried to keep up with the times by offering new more relevant programs for their members. But one cannot ignore the fact that the vast majority of the programs that the

church has are inwardly focused. The programs and activities are designed for their members. There set-up to keep their members happy and coming back to the church. Very few if any of their programs are set-up for outreach purposes only. The conversation would change only when we asked, “Are these programs and activities the best way to spend our time, money, and energy for the spread of the gospel in our neighborhood and in all the nations?”<sup>6</sup> That’s the real question if the churches mission is to reach their community and world with the gospel of Jesus Christ shouldn’t every program that they have be focused on outreach? The majority of the programs that the church claims is an outreach is still based on the people coming to the church not the church going to the people, which is the biblical model. The sadder part about this is that the church has allowed these programs and activities to go on for so long that many of them have become sacred cows that no one wants to get rid of.

The church needs to go through and evaluate every program and activity it does to see what outreach qualities they have and when they discover the program has no outreach qualities they need to ask themselves why are we doing it. One great example of this is the Christmas program that just about every church does every year. The names have changed over the years from a cantata to Christmas pageants. But one thing has not changed and that is the countless thousands of dollars and man power hours wasted to put these programs on. Music has to be bought, costumes bought or made, sets to be constructed, and fliers printed. Then the choir and all the people in the program have to start practicing sometimes as early September so they will be ready to put the show on in December. The church will justify all this time and money by saying the program is an

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<sup>6</sup> Platt, David. *Radical Together*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), 113.



outreach to the community since they always invited every year. Unfortunately there are several problems with their thinking. First off it all based on the people coming to the church to see the program. Then these programs are usually for entertainment value only, they really don't have an evangelistic element to them. Nor is the church going after the truly non-believing un-churched population with this program. Then lastly if any non-church members do show up very few if any have a conversion experience or join the church. So realistically the Christmas program is strictly for entertainment value only. The only thing that would be more entertaining would be for someone to stand up at a business meeting and say let's do away with the Christmas program.

Would it not make more sense and be more in line with the Churches mission if it took all the money and time it put into the Christmas program and did real outreach in their community? No matter where one lives they don't have to look very far to see that there are people who need both spiritual and physical help all around them. So wouldn't it make more sense for the church to focus outwardly on those in need during the Christmas season instead of focusing inwardly on themselves? Think how many coats or how much food could be bought with the money spent on the Christmas program. Then the members could go out and deliver the coats and food to the needy. Then by meeting these peoples physical needs they have opened the door to helping them with their spiritual needs. This is what the church should be all about, getting out and helping people in their communities that are less fortunate than they are. They should be meeting their needs and sharing the good news of Jesus with them. That is what Jesus did; he went from town to town helping those who need help. He met people's physical needs.

Not all church programs are bad and need to be thrown out. Some of the programs are in line with biblical principles and are very outreach focused. Then other programs with just a little adjustment can become a very successful outreach program. This will not be an easy process for the church to go through but it is a process that all churches need to go through. Because as this paper has pointed out the churches main mission is outreach. Reaching out to those around them who not only need to hear the good news of Jesus but they also need help in many areas of their lives. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that living our faith would be easy. Nowhere does it say our faith will be measured by how many times we went to church or if we have a perfect Sunday school attendance. It does tell us we are to go serve those less fortunate than us. It also tells us that the churches and people that do go and serve will be blessed. So if the church wants to survive and flourish it needs to evaluate all its programs and see if they are in line with biblical principles and if there not they need to get rid of them or adjust them so they are in line with the word of God.

### **Disciples Must Make Disciples**

Now that the church has evaluated all its programs and have done away with the programs that are not focused outwardly they must get all their members involved in doing outreach. Outreach cannot be left to the professional ministers, missionaries, and evangelists. Outreach ministry is the job of everyone who is a born again believer in Jesus Christ, it's not an option. Some people claim that we can be Christians without necessarily becoming disciples. I wonder, then, why the last thing Jesus told us was to go

into the world, making *disciples* of all nations, teaching them to obey all that He commanded. You'll notice that He *didn't* add, "But hey, if that's too much to ask, tell them to just become Christians—you know, the people who get to go to heaven without having to commit to anything."<sup>7</sup> If the church wants to be in-line with what Christ commanded them to do everyone needs to be involved in outreach of some type. So if the church wants to reclaim lost ground and claim new ground for the Kingdom they need to get everyone involved in doing ministry. Getting everyone involved in ministry will be as difficult for the church as it is to get rid of all their programs that were not outwardly focused. Unfortunately many of the church members think that all the time they spend keeping their inward programs and traditions going is serving the Lord, but in reality all they are doing is busy work to keep dying programs going. Kyle Idleman makes a great point about this in his book, *not a fan*, where he says, "Woe to you fans, if you would be as passionate about feeding the poor as you are church's style of worship, then world hunger would end this week. Woe to you fans, if you sacrificed as much to care for the homeless and hungry in the community as you do for your church building or place of worship, the need would be wiped out. Woe to you fans, if you would be as zealous about caring for the sick as you are about a 'Christmas tree' being called a 'holiday tree' health insurance wouldn't be a problem."<sup>8</sup> We have to stop being a fan of Jesus and start being a follower that does ministry by reaching out to those around us that need the love of Jesus. Another problem is that many of the members feel that it's the responsibility of the paid professionals to do the outreach work and their responsibility is to just show up on Sundays and Wednesdays. Jesus commandment in the Bible is very

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<sup>7</sup> Chan, Francis. *Crazy Love*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Idleman, Kyle. *Not a fan*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 82.

clear in that He commands all believers to get out and do ministry not just the apostles, preachers, or missionaries. Those who are believers in Jesus Christ are to go out at any cost and take the good news of Jesus to world. The believers need to rediscover the joy of doing hands on ministry.

Nothing will touch the heart of a believer and help them rekindle their desire to help those in need than actually getting out and doing ministry. One of the biggest problems in the church today is that they have reduce outreach to writing a check or giving some money to a program that pays someone else to do ministry while they sit safely within the security of the church. But once they get out of the safety of the church and start to help those less fortunate than they are they will feel the joy that the bible talks about. When they look into the eyes of those in need and reach out and touch them and help them they will be a changed person. When they hear the heartfelt thank-you from the person they have just helped they will experience the blessing that the Jesus talks about. But it all starts by doing ministry getting out of the comfort zone and doing it. This is something that anyone can do they need no special training or special education to do out reach. There is an old camp meeting saying that needs resurrection “God doesn’t call the equipped; God equips the called.”<sup>9</sup> God will equip all believers to do ministry and outreach because all believers are called to do ministry. The believers need to quit trying to do things under their own power and start relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s the only way the church can accomplish the mission it has been given by Christ. Again since all believers have been called, all can do ministry.

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<sup>9</sup> Sweet, 254.

The proof of this theory is seen to be true by looking at the churches that are growing and changing the world for Christ today. The churches that are growing in America and the world are the ones that have broken with church traditions and have involved the majority of their membership in outreach based ministries. They have all age groups from children to seniors doing ministry in one way or another. This is the biblical model that Jesus uses to send out his followers to the people. The churches that follow this model of Christ are the ones that God is blessing. Not only is He blessing the churches He is also blessing the members that are doing the ministry. So if a church wants to grow the easiest way is to follow the biblical model and get their members involved in doing outward focused minister. The church also is strengthened as its people engage in good works. The way to *inwardly* build a church is through *outward* service.<sup>10</sup> So it is very simple if the church today wants to grow and accomplish its mission to take the good news of Jesus to the world they need to get all their members involved in doing ministry.

### **Outreach Ministries**

As mentioned above one of the things the church must do if it wants to grow and accomplish the mission it is given by Christ is to develop outwardly focus ministries. Many churches today are so steeped in tradition that they really don't know how or what ministries they should start or many will try to start ministries that worked thirty to forty years ago that will not work today. Many churches are also in transitioning

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<sup>10</sup> Rusaw, Rick & Swanson, Eric. *The Externally focused Church*. (Loveland: Group, 2004), 87.

neighborhoods that don't have the same demographics that they did when the church was built. So those churches that have not packed up and moved to the suburbs needs to evaluate their communities and see what the needs of the people are right outside the doors and across the street from their churches. Not only is it important for the church to see what their communities need, they also need to see what skills members in their churches have that can translate into ministries. In America fewer people are coming to faith through the old methods. People want more than arguments for faith: they want proof of faith.<sup>11</sup> Getting out and doing ministry in one's community is how the church proves its faith. What can your church offer your community? Child care? Life-skills training? Recovery workshops? What do you have of value in your church that's worth taking into the community?<sup>12</sup> So what the church needs to do is see what skills their members have and what their communities need and then match them up and develop outwardly focused ministries.

Many churches have members who can be very helpful in doing ministry to those in need their communities. Most churches survey their members to see who will be interested in serving on the standing committees of the church or to teach Sunday school. Very few however survey their members to see which members have skills that can be used in outwardly focused ministries. For instance if a church has a mechanic or two they could be used to do a car check-up day at the church for single moms or low income families. If the church has bankers or accountants they can do financial planning classes or how to do budgeting classes for the community. Also if the church has some nurses or

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 205.

doctors they could do some free health check-ups for the community. As one can see the possibilities for community focused ministry are limitless. This accomplishes several things for the church. First of all it gets the majority of the members of the church involved in some type of ministry serving others. This also gives them the opportunity to experience the joy of serving others and see the joy and thankfulness in the face of the ones they are helping. There was someone who did all these things quite well—Jesus! Think about it. He earned people’s trust through service and sacrifice. He invited people to serve alongside Him.<sup>13</sup> Not only does this get the membership involved in doing ministry it also shows the community that the church cares about them and wants to help them. Again once the church meets the people’s physicals needs they have then earned the right to talk to them about their spiritual needs.

After the church has surveyed their members to see how they can get them involved then they need to look around their community to see what their needs are. Figuring out the needs of the churches surrounding community can be a little more difficult than figuring out the gifts of the members of the church. The church has to be careful not to fall into the old trap of developing more programs for their members and make sure they focus on the needs of those outside of the church, the lost and needy. Hopefully the church will know their own communities well enough that they will know what some of the needs of their community are. If not there are some outreach ministries that all churches can start. One of them is to start a clothes closet for those who need clothes. This is a very simple project that any church can do with minimal cost and man power. First they have all the members of the church go through their homes and gather

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<sup>13</sup> Dyck, Drew. *Generation Ex-Christian*. (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 40.

up all the clothes, coats, and shoes they no longer wear and bring them to the church. Then a few people can sort, fold, and hang the clothes and get them ready to open up to the public. The church this author pastors started a clothes closet at the church he serves last year. This was something new and different so many of the old timers thought this was a waste of time and energy and they thought no one would show up. What the church did was get everything set-up and put an ad in the local paper that the clothes closet would be open Saturday from ten to two o'clock and anyone who needed some clothes could come by and get what they needed. The first Saturday that the church opened the clothes closet over a hundred people came to get clothes. This really shocked the old timers who thought no one would show up. They had been so inwardly focused on their own needs for so long that they had lost touch with their community and had no idea that there are some many people in need right outside their doors. Many churches in America are the same way in that they have been so inwardly focused that have no idea what's going on right outside their own church. They hang out with their church friends and don't go to the parts of town where the needy live. So the poor and needy are out of sight so they are not in the minds of the church members. Once the church saw how successful the first clothes closet was they started serving lunch while the clothes closet was opened and now the church has a lot of people who just show up to get something to eat. Since the church started the clothes closet and lunch program over a year ago the church has served over several thousand people. The church that is doing this has about a hundred members on the roles and only about seventy of those members are active in the church. So this goes to show that a church of any size can be doing ministry outside of the church.



Another program that the church has started is a small scale food bank for those people who might call or stop by the church needing food on days they are not serving free lunches. Again this is very easy for any size church to do. The church simply asked the members to pick up some extra nonperishable food products when they go to the grocery store. Then we divided all the food up into shopping bags so when someone calls or stops by all we have to do is hand them a couple bags of groceries to hold them over until they get back on their feet. Again this is something simple that any size church in any city can start doing as an outreach ministry. Ministries like these will be need more than ever as the economy and the job market continues to decline in America.

There are also countless educational classes that churches can offer for those people in their surrounding communities. Again the church that this author serves also get many calls a week from people who need financial help paying bills. There are several reasons that these people need help paying their bills such as lost jobs, bad economy, and unexpected illnesses. But a recurring theme that the church noticed in just about every case we dealt with was due to a lack of any financial training or advice from someone they can trust. So the church started a basic budgeting class to help those in the community who needed help with their finances. This class teaches them how to set-up a budget and stick to it. It also gives them ideas on how they can save money when they go shopping for all types of things they and their families need. The church also noticed that there was another need in our community to help people find employment. So the church started a class on how to find and get a job. This class covers everything from how to right a resume, how to dress for an interview, and how to conduct oneself during the interview. These were areas that the majority of the people were lacking in. So now the

church will have someone who helps them develop their resumes and prints them several copies on nice paper to hand out. The church also keeps their resume on file so if they ever need more they can stop by and get them. The church also will provide them with a nice set of clothes so they can look good for their interviews if they don't have any. Then the church will help them learn how to respond to questions during their interviews. This has helped several people in the community get much needed jobs. These are just a few classes that this author's church has offered to our surrounding community. The classes a church offers will be determined by the needs of the local community surrounding each church. This is another reason it is so important for a church to know the community right outside its doors. Because the better they know and understand their communities the better they can meet their needs.

There are also a lot more outreach classes that most churches can offer with little or no cost to the church other than getting members to volunteer and possibly text books. Again depending on the demographic of the churches community they can offer classes to help people get their GED's so they get a better job or pursue some higher education. With the Hispanic population in America growing at a rapid rate English as a second language is always a popular class that can lead to cross-cultural ministry opportunities. So as one can see there are countless classes the church can offer to help those in their communities better themselves. This will also show the community members that the church really does care for them. Also since many churches only use their buildings two days a week which leaves it empty during the rest of the week. So another great opportunities for the church is to open a daycare center for low-income and single mothers or a senior care center. Now starting a daycare center will take a little more

time, energy, and money depending on the local laws of the city that the church is located in but it is still very doable. This is a very big need in almost every city due to the fact that wages are not keeping up with cost of daycare. There are so many needs in our communities that it shouldn't be very hard for churches to figure out what kind of ministries are needed and will work in their areas. Also the more ministries that the church does the more opportunities will be available for their members to get involved in. But the main reason a church should be involved in outreach ministry is because it what Jesus commanded His church to do. It is also what Jesus himself did, He went out and met people's needs and ministered to them.

This change from an inwardly focused church to an outwardly focused church will not be easily accomplished if the church does not have a strong leader in the pastor's position. This will most likely be the fight of the pastor's life if he chooses to try to lead the church back to its biblical mission that it was given by Jesus. As mentioned earlier in this paper so many churches have been locked into their traditions that they feel they are really doing the will of God even though there not. So for the pastor to tell them that their just going through the motions and not really doing God's will for the church will not go over very well. But if the leader is focused and committed to the mission of leading the church back it will not happen, he will be overwhelmed by the membership. The culture of the church follows the culture of the leadership. The leaders' understanding and ownership overflow to everyone.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately many pastors have tried to fight the good fight and lead their churches back to their biblical mission and have failed. The main reason for their failure is the unwillingness of the membership to

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<sup>14</sup> Rainer, Thom & Geiger Eric. *Simple Church*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 126.

see they are not doing God's will. It is at that point that they start to fight the leaderships desire to change the church. Once this starts the leadership has to decide do they fight the good fight and most likely lose their job or do they just go along with the membership and give them what they want. Or many times the leadership themselves are so locked into the churches traditions that they to feel the path the church is on is the right one. So if the church truly wants to change they will need a strong leadership team that is willing to stay the course and return the church to its true mission. Without focus, the church becomes cluttered despite its process. Without focus the process is unrecognizable because so many other programs and events surround it. Without focus, the process is buried somewhere underneath a myriad of special events and activities.<sup>15</sup> This is what happens when a church does not have focused leadership; the direction of the church becomes lost among all the programs and activities that do not accomplish kingdom results.

There is nothing more important that the majority of the churches in America need to do today than to evaluate all that they are doing and check to see if it is in line with the mission that Jesus gave the church to complete. If the church is not in line with the mission that Jesus has given it, it needs to start the process of change to get the church back on course. This will most likely not be an easy task for the leadership or the membership but it is task that has to be done if the church wants to survive and change the world for Christ. Because the church should not be inwardly focused on itself, it's not about them; it's about those outside of the church who don't know Jesus. Jesus was very clear that the church is to *go* out and reach all the nations for Him. This will not be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 77.

accomplished by churches that have been doing the same thing for the last hundred years. This will take churches that are will to do whatever needs to be done to rediscover their mission to reach the world for Christ.

### **In Closing**

As one can see from this paper the church in America is in a serious state of decline and if it does not make some changes it could result as the end of the church as we know it. Over the last fifty years the church has become so inwardly focused on itself that it has totally lost focus on the lost people they are commanded to reach that are right outside their doors. The church has replaced its commandment to reach out to the lost with the business of traditions and programs that are focused inwardly on themselves. The church needs to rediscover the truths of the Word of God that tell them over and over again, it is not about them, it is about the hurting and the lost that need to be lead to Christ both in their community's and the world.

The only way the church will be able to accomplish the Great Commission will be if it makes some major changes it how it does church. The church needs to evaluate all that they do and if their programs are not focused on outreach they need to adjust them to become outreach programs. The church has to rediscover the joy of helping those who are less fortunate then they are. They need to get back into the habit of getting all its members involved in doing ministry not just talking about doing ministry. Once the members rediscover the joy of doing ministry then one will start to see revival start to sweep across our nation and world. The next great revival in our nation will come from

the church members getting out and doing ministry and talking about ministry. Outreach cannot be done from the safety of the church. Outreach has to be done outside in the streets where the lost are. The lost and hurting are not going to come to the church in the twenty-first century, the church is going to have to go to them. This is what Jesus did, He went to the people and met them at their point of need, He did not wait for the people to come to Him. Therefore all believers need to follow Jesus commandment and example and got to the lost.

If the church does not change the way it does church and start to reach out to the lost in their community's and world the church could die. The church has been in a serious state of decline for the last forty years and if it doesn't make some changes it will continue to decline until it is too late. This change needs to be preached from the pulpit and taught in the Sunday school classrooms. The church has to rediscover that its sole purpose is to reach out to the lost and hurting and lead them to a relationship with Jesus. This is the only way the church will regain the ground it has lost and return America to the Christian nation it once was.

## APPENDIX A

### Survey Questions

1. How old is your church?  
a. 0 to 10 b. 10 to 20 c. 20 to 30 d. 30 to 40 e. 40 to 50 f. 50 to 60 g. 60 to 70 h. 70+
2. What is the size of your congregation?  
a. 0 to 50 b. 50 to 100 c. 100 to 200 d. 200 to 300 e. 300 to 400 f. 400 to 500 g. 500+
3. Has your membership increased or decreased with in the last year, and by how much?
4. How many Baptisms did your church have in the last year?
5. How many of those baptisms were church members Children, and transfers from another denomination, and how many where un-churched people?
6. What type of local outreach programs does your church do: such as a clothes closet, soup kitchen, recovery groups, and how often do you do them?
7. Does your church do any local outreach that focuses on the un-churched, non-believer, and neglected segment of your community, if so what is it?
8. What is your churches annual budget?  
a. 50,000 to 100,000 b. 100,000 to 200,000 c. 200,000 to 300,000 d. 300,000 to 400,000  
e. 500,000+
9. How much money does your church spend on internal programs such as: Bible study material, choir, worship service technology, Christmas programs, and etc.?  
a. 1,000 to 2,000 b. 2,000 to 3,000 c. 3,000 to 4,000 d. 4,000 to 5,000 e. 5,000+

10. How much does your church spend on Local outreach programs only? Please do not include denominational home and foreign mission offerings. Just include what your church spends to reach the people in your local community.

- a. 0 to 500 b. 500 to 1,000 c. 1,000 to 2,000 d. 2,000 to 3,000 e. 3,000 to 4,000 f. 5,000+



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