

## Real Faith

# OUT OF CHURCH BELIEVERS & THE GROWING UNEASINESS OF CHRISTIANS

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*Many Christians are leaving the church out of frustration. Congregations are not just losing the expected 'rebellious Christians' who disagree with the core doctrines of Christianity, or a brother or sister that has fallen away. On the contrary, these congregations are losing leaders, devout in a faith in Jesus Christ, yet frustrated with the growing apathy that is creeping into so many churches.*

According to a 2000 Gallup Poll, 44% of Christians surveyed identified themselves as being unchurched (stating that they either do not belong to church or have attended regular Church services in the past six months). Christian researcher, George Barna, recently released findings that over 10 million born again Christians do not attend an organized church. New Zealander, Andrew Strom of 'Mercy and Truth Ministries' comments on this phenomenon, This 'Out-of-church' phenomenon has

now grown so large that books are being written about it.

In fact, several years ago I heard an estimate that there are TENS OF THOUSANDS of such Christians just in our largest city (Auckland) alone. And I believe it is the same right across the Western nations. I have personally come into contact with literally hundreds of such people. The surprising thing is that they are often the most committed kind of Christians - praying, insightful, deep-thinking. Yet they have grown tired of 'playing the game' inside our church system and have opted out. Often their involvement goes back many years. In fact, they had commonly been leaders of various kinds.'

Unfortunately, pastors are not helping the problem. Dwindling membership is often not a problem pastors wish to acknowledge. Churches today are isolated from one another. It is rare to see pastors reach out to each other from different denominations, but it is even rarer to see pastors reach out within the same denomination.

A friend and pastor at a local area church here in my home town of Vancouver, WA departed from a much larger church as a youth pastor about 10 years ago. He left this church with great peace, and was excited to obey the Lord's calling for him to become a head pastor at a

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start-up church across town. Much to his surprise, the head pastor at the church my friend was leaving was deeply offended at his departure. Rather than assisting in the transition, the head pastor refused to help, and a rift between the two churches (both identical in theology and atmosphere) developed. This rift, now nearly a decade old, still remains today. If our pastors, those anointed by the Lord, cannot come together in allegiance to support one another, how then can we expect fellow brothers and sisters to attend traditional church settings?

Andrew Strom comments on the mind set of these Christians, -But now they have left. Why? The church obviously finds this a very difficult thing to explain or deal with. The usual accusations are often trotted out: 'So-and-so has been hurt and has a root of bitterness'. Or they are in 'rebellion'. Or they are 'not a team player'. Or they are 'backsliding'.

But if you talk to these people you will often find that they have been sitting in church for years and years, and they simply cannot stand to sit and watch the same old game being played any more. The LACK OF GOD is what gets to them - even in our most 'Spirit-filled' churches. WHERE IS GOD IN ALL OF OUR ACTIVITY? Surely this is not the way it is supposed to be?

New fads and programs come and go, but the mediocrity and LACK OF GOD just seem to go on forever. And so quietly, sometimes without anyone even noticing, they slowly slip out the doors - never to return. Some have even told me that they felt God 'calling them out'. Others simply felt they couldn't stay there anymore.

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Many churches are resorting to gimmicks or programs to retain members. Sermons are being packaged into something akin to public relations or marketing campaigns. These teachings are now theme driven, and promoted in multiple week series blocks in the hope that Christians are able to 'keep up' or follow along (particularly if they miss a Sunday). These carefully planned lesson series are commonplace within the church today, and all are designed to 'lure' in members as well as to keep the attention of regular attendees. These campaigns force pastors to remain "on topic" throughout the promised 4, 6, or 8 week time frame, but they also put God's Word in a box.

### **CANNOT THE WORD OF GOD STAND ON ITS OWN?**

About 10 years ago I attended a friend's church, a well-known, seasoned and well respected church body. After the sermon I was invited and agreed to attend a Bible study in one of the church's classrooms. It turned out that the 'Bible study' was nothing more than an informational meeting led by an associate pastor who was excited about a recent surge in church attendance, particularly with the younger demographics of the church. The session then became a 'get out the word' pep rally, but unfortunately, the 'word' was the church, not the Word of God.

The evidence of pastors looking to their 'demographics' rather than to the Lord is growing more evident. Now more than ever, pastors and televangelists are 'under the gun' to perform instead of preach. The pressure to attract new members to their ministry is becoming a necessity in the minds of some ministers.

When a church loses its members the issue quickly becomes one of economics. Fewer members equal fewer dollars for the church's budget, and less dollars force churches to make decisions as to whether or not they can survive. But such hardships within churches have tempted pastors to attribute the successes of their ministry

in terms of the size of their membership, and not in the number of souls reaped.

The forecast for the Church is not rosy. A recent study conducted by ARIA found that Christian churches have suffered a 10% drop in their membership, and forecasted another 40% drop over the next 30 years. Should these statistics prove true, a consolidation of churches or a disbanding of congregations is likely.

### **THE SILVER LINING**

Fortunately, there is a silver lining to this situation within the Body of Christ. While Christians are leaving what we would consider traditional churches, - home churches and untraditional congregations (such as the Internet) are on the rise. I believe that many of these Christians are still seeking communion with each other and the Lord, but in an environment more akin to the early church. Though a congregation of believers may gather between walls, it is by no means bound by them.

The Church (or Body of Christ) is a living organism comprised by believers gathering in Christ's name. As Christians, we should recognize that these gatherings are no less viable than the traditional ones we have grown accustomed.

Perhaps the Lord is sending a message to our leaders (His anointed) to return to a more grassroots approach to spreading the Gospel. Perhaps He has another plan for these shifts in traditional church memberships, but regardless of how we meet, it is important to realize that as Christians we are not to remain isolated. As Andrew Strom states, 'But it is not possible to stay "alone" forever.' Some day, if these people are going to be part of a new move of God's Spirit they are going to have to come of their wilderness and become part of the 'BODY' that Jesus brings together - the new wineskin that will come with this new move of God.

God bless, and feel free to drop me a line anytime.

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