

# Welcome to McChurch

– Charles Colson *with* Ellen Santilli Vaughn –

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*Millions are served, but are they being fed?*

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When my wife, Patty, and I were in Japan a few years ago, our hosts suggested we take a free afternoon to visit what was then the fastest growing church in the world. So three Japanese pastors crowded themselves and Patty and me into a small Toyota and headed for a hilly area just outside downtown Tokyo.

After winding through crowded streets, we turned onto a beautiful, tree-lined drive leading to imposing black gates marking the entrance to the headquarters of the PL Kyodan (the Perfect Liberty Church). Since only members of this Buddhist sect could be admitted, we had to content ourselves with peering through the gates.

Rich, green lawns stretched as far as the eye could see, blending into a distant, sprawling, golf course. From the front gates the drive meandered toward an elegant white mansion surrounded by artistically sculptured gardens. Except for the pagoda roof, it might have been mistaken for Jefferson's Monticello or Washington's Mount Vernon.

Within the gates, we learned, was a "town" of 3,000 residents. Perfect Liberty Church boasted the most complete recreational facilities in all of Japan, along with such landscape delights as artificial lakes, cherry trees, and waterfalls.

While we gazed at the grandeur of the complex called "paradise" by its founders, our host explained the simple theology of the Perfect Liberty Church: We are all children of God who find The Way to eternal peace and welfare by freely exercising our individuality. This involves free, creative expression in prayer, golf, or group sex. The important thing is total freedom for individual expression, which results in complete joy and fulfillment. Perfect Liberty also offers a utopian vision of the future. In time, it promises, as the movement spreads, all evil will disappear and humanity will live in perfect liberty and harmony. No wonder it is the fastest-growing religion in Japan, winning almost a million followers in its first decade of existence.

It is also the richest religion, for the Perfect Liberty Church teaches that giving is a prerequisite to salvation. Worshipers bring "treasure bags" to the altar, and they are always overflowing. When you can buy happiness, why be stingy?

During our flight back to the States, I read some literature I'd picked up on the Perfect Liberty Church. Periodically I would nudge Patty with a "Look at this," and pass her a booklet containing some outrageous statement.

"What nonsense," I said at one point. "They're saying that you can do whatever you want as long as it makes you happy. And they call that church!"

Hours later, while we were settling into our Los Angeles hotel room for the night, we flipped on the TV and scanned the channels, waiting for something to catch our eye. It did.

A man and a woman were seated on an overstuffed sofa in the middle of a grand, gaudy set. A huge, stained-glass window shimmered in the light next to a portrait of Jesus on black velvet. Large palms spilled out of every corner. The white-and-gold baby grand was a showstopper, but it was really the two on the sofa who fascinated us.

His salt-and-pepper hair, combed back in neat waves, looked like it might be held in place by epoxy. His dark eyes and mustache would have made him seem as sinister as a Wild West villain if it hadn't been for the charming foil provided by his mate. She was a Southern belle with a fuchsia, ruffled dress and huge, silvery-blond hair. She sat primly, holding her Bible, alternating adoring glances at her husband with arched-eyebrow nods to the studio audience, apparently coaxing them to adore him, too. Her smile remained as fixed as his hair during the 20 minutes we watched.

But it was not just the absurd scenery and costumes that captivated us. It was the message of this Christian program: You can have perfect peace, joy, happiness, and prosperity, the host said. God wants no one to suffer or be deprived. Just ask. Ask and you will receive in abundance.

It was a virtuoso performance, the man's gestures and voice modulation expertly timed. One moment he excitedly invoked rapture, the next he oozed syrupy comfort - the woman nodding and adoring.

Patty and I found ourselves nudging one another as we had on the airplane. "What nonsense. Imagine it! And they call this the church...."

My voice trailed off. Patty and I stared at each other. I think we realized at precisely the same moment that what we were watching on that set was no different than what we had heard about and seen in the Perfect Liberty Church in Japan.

But the parallels do not end with this televised travesty. For when we peered through those gates at that ludicrous Buddhist sect, what we really saw was a reflection of the identity crisis in the church.

## IDENTITY CRISIS

The roots of the church's identity crisis are found in the consumer mentality so pervasive in our culture. Aside from those hierarchical denominations that assign members to the parish wherein they live, most Americans are free to choose which church they will join or attend. And choose they do.

Ask people what they look for in a church, and the number-one response is "fellowship." Other answers range from "good sermons" to "the music program" to "youth activities for the kids" to "it makes me feel good." People flit about in search of what suits their taste at the moment.

It's what some have called the "McChurch" mentality. Today it might be McDonald's for a Big Mac, tomorrow Wendy's salad bar. The church becomes another retail outlet, faith just another commodity. People change congregations and preachers and even denominations as readily as they change banks or grocery stores.

Polls tell us what these consumers are seeking. According to a USA Today survey, of the 56 percent of Americans who attend church, 45 percent do so because "it's good for you," while 26 percent cited "peace of mind and spiritual well-being." Specific doctrines did not seem important, the pollster reported. Most appeared to be "looking for that inner and more subjective kind of payoff" from religion.

According to a recent survey reported in *Business Week*, the books selling in Christian bookstores are the "touchy feely" ones that focus on self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-analysis, while "devotionals and missionary biographies gather dust on the shelves. So do books encouraging self-sacrifice."

Even secular observers have noted how this demand for "feel better" religion is affecting church life and practice. A *1990 Newsweek* cover story heralded the dramatic religious resurgence among the nation's baby boomers. But "unlike earlier religious revivals," the story noted, "the aim this time (apart from born-again traditionalists of all faiths) is support, not salvation, help rather than holiness, a circle of spiritual equals rather than an authoritative church or guide. A group affirmation of self is at the top of the agenda, which is why some of the least demanding churches are now in the greatest demand."

What many are looking for is a spiritual social club, an institution that offers convivial relationships but avoids influencing people on how they live or what they believe. Whenever the church does assert a historically orthodox position, one that might in some way restrict all individual's doing whatever he or she chooses, the church is accused of being "out of touch"-as if its beliefs are to be determined by majority vote or market surveys.

Spiritual consumers are interested not in what the church stands for but in the fulfillment it can deliver. This consumer mentality pressures churches to respond in kind.

When the findings of an Eli Lilly foundation study revealed the sharp decline of several Protestant denominations, the chief researcher acknowledged with disarming candor: "The challenge, I tell ministers, is that they must ask themselves why people are in front of them on Sunday mornings instead of somewhere else. The church is in a competitive situation for people's leisure time." We are competing with cable TV, Nintendo games, theme parks, and health clubs.

Churches across the country are responding to the McChurch consumer by downplaying doctrines or demands and disguising their identity. Even a conservative bastion like Denver's Full Gospel Chapel has changed its name to the Happy Church. "It draws people," says the pastor.

Apparently so. The church has just taken over a 7.8 million-dollar shopping mall. It is hard to argue with success- except that capitulating to consumerism has profound consequences for the church.

## **CONSUMERISM's DANGERS**

**First, merely responding to the market dilutes the church's message.**

As *Newsweek* writer Kenneth Woodward notes, some clergy have simply "airbrushed sin out of their language. Having substituted therapy for spiritual discernment, they appeal to the nurturing God who helps his (or *her*) people cope. Heaven by this creed is never having to say no to yourself, and God is never having to say you're sorry."

Sociologist Robert Bellah and his co-writers in *Habits of the Heart* make the same point, decrying the tendency in evangelical ranks to "thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfillment."

**Second, responding to the market means more than "airbrushing" a word here or there; it changes the very character of the church.**

The body is transformed from a worshiping community into a comforting haven removed from life's pressures. What J. I. Packer calls "hot tub religion" embraces anything that makes us feel better about ourselves.

**Third, responding to the market can pervert the Gospel.**

Certainly the church should provide comfort for the grieving, the suffering, and the needy. But ministering to the afflicted is entirely different from the self-realization therapy that teaches us to look within ourselves to discover and heal our wounded psyche.

The Gospel teaches that our hope is not in finding our true self but in losing our true self. That which defiles us is what is *in us*, Christ said. When we honestly look inside at our sin-scarred lives, we ought to be repulsed by our "true" selves. We then repent and die to ourselves so that Christ's atoning grace might cleanse us.

Adjusting to ourselves is precisely what we mustn't do, says Robert Coles, renowned Harvard psychologist and Christian. "Adjustment and adaptation is so often an acquiescence to the most banal and crude, if not blasphemous, in a given society."

This is why the feel-good, restore your self-worth, therapeutic gospel *is* so dangerous. It is but a short step from therapy to the health-and-wealth, "name it and claim it" heresy, forms of which are propagated in conservative churches as well as by unscrupulous televangelists. Pay your money for God's blessings, proclaim Robert Tton and others.

Therapy and the promise of material reward may lure people into our churches, but so might free reefers handed out in the sanctuary-and it's debatable which would do more harm.

#### **Fourth, succumbing to consumerism strips the church of its authority.**

The feel-good gospel and any of its variants open the door to one of the most dangerous movements of our day. Seeking to provide inner peace instead of pointing individuals to an ethical ideal of which they now fall short, this approach perilously parallels and makes credible the New Age movement.

Perhaps this is why, while 80 percent of Americans profess to be Christian, about half of all Americans believe in ESP, more than a third in mental telepathy, one-quarter in reincarnation, and one out of five say they have been in touch with the dead.

More than 15 million Americans find, as writer Rich Gilbert notes, "born-again Christianity is too tacky, Protestantism and Judaism too suburban and Catholicism too papal." So instead of flocking to churches, they flee to mountaintop highs, touchy-feely retreats, and healing spas where they discover the mystical power of crystals.

By responding to market pressures, the church forfeits its authority to proclaim truth and loses its ability to call its members to account. In other words, it can no longer disciple and discipline. But as alien and archaic as the idea may seem, the task of the church is not to make men and women happy; it is to make them holy.

### **THE WRONG STANDARD**

No wonder the church has an identity crisis. We speak glibly about going to church (even though the church is not a place)--to feel good (absolutely the wrong reason). Then we compound the error by measuring the church against the wrong standard.

Over the years, I've conducted my own informal poll of pastors. "How are things going in your church?" I'll ask. With few exceptions, the answers are quantitative: "Membership up 20 percent ... 100 baptisms last year...starting a new building ... going to three services."

Cultural values have so captured the church that we equate success with size. It is a reflex reaction. If a church is not growing, someone is doing something wrong. Maybe the pastor and the board haven't analyzed the market well enough or invested in the right programs. This is why church growth has become the hottest business in the religious world today.

If "the customer is king," then the church has to react as any organization does to consumer demand, which means discovering the right marketing strategy. According to one church-growth movement leader, a minister's performance is measured not by faithfulness to the gospel but by whether "the people keep coming and giving." With the right strategy, the argument goes, there is no limit to growth; it's simply a matter of finding the right formula. To this end, many professional organizations furnish churches the same services commercial marketers or political-campaign strategists subscribe to: polls, market studies, message analysis, image making, advertising, and product labeling.

Church growth has not only become big business, it also emulates big business. Church-growth literature often speaks of products, services, and investments: "x" amount of time and money invested in a particular project will yield "y" results. Believing that successful business principles can produce similar results for the church, one megachurch sent groups to study firms such as IBM, Xerox, and Disney World.

There is nothing wrong with growth itself, of course. Nor is there anything inherently wrong with marketing strategies.

Some church bodies, for example, aggressively seek to evangelize unchurched people. Willow Creek Church exemplifies this. Having targeted a Chicago suburb, it is one of the nation's fastest-growing megachurches. Willow Creek has proven the value of intelligent technique: surveying neighborhoods, finding out what people want in a church, and carefully constructing appealing programs that draw people to attend services.

The trouble comes when we confuse technique with truth and when the mission or message is compromised. Many churches like Willow Creek, have found the right balance; behind all the Music and skits and fanfare stands a solidly orthodox message that deepens the spiritual life of the members.

Indeed, growth may be a sign of God's blessing. It surely was when Peter preached after Pentecost. People were convicted, they repented, and were baptized - 3,000 on the first day; and the Lord "added to their number daily"



(Acts 2:47; NIV), with 5,000 in one day alone. That is the kind of growth that would be the envy of even the slickest professionals in the church-growth movement. But it was the Lord adding to the numbers, not marketing experts.

That is the key. What matters is not whether a church uses skits or contemporary music or squash courts. What matters is biblical fidelity. If a thoroughly orthodox church challenges people to live holy lives and is growing, it is being blessed by God.

But if a church disguises its identity and preaches a message intended to keep everyone in a state of perpetual bliss, then its growth is man-made. "Growth for growth's sake, man-made growth can be spiritually deadening," says writer Richard Neuhaus. "Institutional growth is the last refuge of ministries that are spiritually sterile."

The real pressure elders and church boards should be putting on their pastors is for spiritual - not numerical - growth.

And while growth is not the sure measure of success, neither should lack of growth be a sign of failure. Take the case of Brian, a young pastor of a small Baptist church in Southern California. I met Brian when he drove me to the airport after a speaking engagement. As we cruised along the freeway, I asked my standard question, "How are things going in your church?"

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "We've kind of been through it." There was a pause. "In fact, we've cut our membership a bit," he said, glancing at me quickly as if expecting me to be disappointed. "To be precise, we've cut our congregation in half."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, we had 220 members, but nothing was happening. I mean, the place was dead, and no matter what I preached, nothing changed. So one day the deacons and I prayed. We said, 'Lord, bring only your people here. We want those who are ready to repent and really give themselves wholly to you.' We even stood at the door of the church silently praying this as people filed in."

Brian glanced at me several times to see if I was questioning his sanity. Who in this age of church growth, in California of all places, would pray for people to stay away from his or their church?



"An amazing thing happened," he explained. "God answered the prayer. People began dropping out, one by one. We went from 220 to about 100. Then the place began to change. We almost went broke, but people got serious with God, they got involved - and now membership is creeping back up."

He grinned and added, "I think we may be going to have revival."

Brian just might be right. Often before revival there is a drop in church attendance. When the Holy Spirit convicts, there is anguish and pain; people confess their sins and repent. Those who are hardened of heart usually flee. Separating the chaff from the wheat signals that the church is becoming pure and holy, becoming the people of God's own choosing.

The church - the body of God's people - has little to do with slick marketing or fancy facilities. It has everything to do with the people and the Spirit of God in their midst. Holiness and biblical faithfulness, not numbers or image, are the true measures of the church.

*Charles Colson is founder and chairman of Prison Fellowship. Ellen Santilli Vaughn is vice-president of executive communications for Prison Fellowship.*

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## INTERVIEW

### A Church Against the World, for the World

**What moved you to write *The Body*-a book about the church?**

Over the last few years I've gone through something of a theological metamorphosis. I've come to realize that Christianity is not an individual transaction, not just the gospel of Jesus and me. God is not as interested in the *individual* Christian living in biblical faithfulness-important though that is as he is in the corporate witness of the church.

**In what ways have evangelicals ignored the church?**

Three or four years ago I came to the realization that we have a scandalously low view of the church. We're almost indifferent about it. When evangelicals consider the maturity of a believer, probably the last thing they think about is

the church he or she attends, or how faithful the person is in church involvement.

We have been so suckered in by the radical individualism of American culture that we've stripped the church of its proper role. But God created the church for the redemption of humankind and to be a witness to the coming kingdom.

Three years ago, when I launched into reading and researching *for The Body*, people would say, "The topic is filled with mine fields! You can't write about the church without dividing people." I realize the dangers. But despite the fact that 81 percent of the American people say they can find the truth about God without reference to church or synagogue, I now believe that you cannot live the Christian life apart from the church.

### **Why has the topic of the church been so neglected?**

It's axiomatic that a people's greatest strength is their greatest weakness. Our greatest strength as evangelicals is the proclamation and presentation of the gospel, because evangelism is such a magnificent obsession for us, we tend to obscure the fullness of the Great Commission, which says we are to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. That implies bringing people into the church, into a body.

### **What then is the church's mission?**

We are to be the church against the world, for the world, to borrow a phrase from the Hartford Declaration. We need more emphasis on *being* as opposed to doing. One major mistake churches make-mainline and evangelical-is to rush out and do projects. But before you can do anything you have to *be* something. And we have to be the community of character in the midst of the sea of mendacity, as Richard John Neuhaus puts it. We have to be the community of light in the darkness. We have to be faithful and true and take as our charge Ephesians 4, the equipping of the saints.

We pray, sometimes unthinkingly, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." But what we're really praying is that the community on earth called the church is to reflect the will of God as it is in heaven. That's a pretty heavy prayer.

### **To what extent do we join with other Christians-other churches-who may not believe as we do? ?**

There is an enormous cosmic battle going on. You've got 1.7 billion confessing Christians in the world, 1 billion Muslims, and 2.5 billion pantheists in Eastern religions. Many evangelicals would write off the Roman Catholics, thereby eliminating 900 million Christians. And if you write off the Roman Catholics you have to write off the Orthodox; there's another 300 million. What are we down to now? Five hundred million, of whom at least half are going to be increasingly irrelevant mainliners. What is the church in the world if we think of it this way? Maybe a couple hundred million-against 1 billion well-organized Muslims who are proselytizing at every opportunity.

Instead, I believe that God has called into one holy catholic and apostolic church all who are regenerated by him, who are orthodox in their faith, who are true Christians. We should see ourselves as members of the same church. Yes, we have differences, and I shouldn't put aside my own doctrinal beliefs. But I do need to focus on the unity of the things we share in common. Then Christians can stand together against the onslaught of forces from what Calvin called the Great Deep. Indeed, Calvin would agree with this view, as would a number of other great Reformed theologians, such as Abraham Kuyper or J. Gresham Machen.

### **Are you hopeful when you think about the future of the church?**

If I were looking for hope in any human measure, I would give up and go fishing. I find pockets of good things happening, but we as a church are losing the culture daily, hourly. Yet God is sovereign. And I am praying that God will sovereignly choose to embolden us. The church *can* become a truly biblical church-not a Sunday-morning hangout or a place for a syrupy, feel-good sermon, but the place where believers come together, bound together in covenant to witness to the kingdom of God.

That's what I hope to see.

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