

# Don't Believe the Lie That Christianity Is Declining

I'm sure you've never heard of Mary Larios. For years she ran a small cantina near Rio Hondo, Guatemala. But after her conversion to Jesus Christ, she went back to the community of Sunsapote, 20 miles from her house, to share her faith with relatives.

Today, about 40 people attend the Bible studies that Mary organized. With the help of her pastor in Rio Hondo, Otoniel Morales, she is buying land to build the first Protestant church in Sunsapote. When I came to visit the town last week, the new converts and some curious spectators joined us for an impromptu worship service under a tree.

There was nothing impressive about this moment, at least by the world's standards. Most of the people there were single mothers with children. All of them live below poverty level. As I poured some oil on a rock to dedicate the land for the new congregation, I wept as I realized how God cares about the people and places we typically ignore.

And I rejoiced that I could see with my own eyes how the gospel is spreading—slow and steady—in a time when skeptics claim that Christianity is fading.

It's fashionable in America today to bash Christians. The mainstream media insists that faith is irrelevant and that churches will soon go the way of eight-track tape players. But the facts say otherwise. Christian faith is growing, especially in the developing world.

I've visited Guatemala more than 10 times, and it's obvious faith is on the rise there. In 1991, about 19 percent of the population attended evangelical churches. Today that number has grown to as much as 30 percent. Almost every time I've

visited, I've been a part of a dedication service for a new church. This same growth is happening in many parts of the world:

- Over the past 100 years in Africa, Christianity has grown from 10 percent of the population to 25 percent.
- Asia's Christian population is expected to grow from 350 million to 460 million by the year 2025, based on current growth rates. It is estimated that more people in China attend church on any given Sunday than in the United States.
- Iran is experiencing an unusual visitation of the Holy Spirit today. One ministry reports that it receives more than 700 requests for information about Jesus from Iranians every day. In spite of intense persecution and the arrest of pastors, an underground house church movement is sweeping the Muslim country.
- In Algeria, which has been staunchly Muslim for centuries, a similar house church movement is growing. After the government recently closed 11 churches, an Algerian pastor told reporters: "The more problems the church faces, the stronger it grows."

We often hear dire warnings that Christianity in America is in decline. But a recent study throws that theory into question. While noting that many mainline churches are closing their doors, the report by Harvard University and Indiana University says the number of Americans who attend church more than once a week, pray daily and read the Bible regularly are actually steady.

The same study found that evangelicals grew from 1972—when they were 18 percent of the population—to about 28 percent from the late 1980s to 2016. Over the same time, mainline churches declined from 35 to 12 percent. Religion in America, the Harvard study says, enjoys "persistent and exceptional intensity."

Glenn Stanton is the author of an important new book, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Hachette). He is full of hope that Christian faith, regardless of how it is persecuted by dictators, maligned by the media or misrepresented by churchgoers themselves, is still moving forward. Says Stanton: "The bottom line is this: faithful Christianity—that which takes the Bible at its word, believes Jesus really is God, that He died on a real cross, rose from a real grave and offers real freedom from real sin to all who ask—is doing quite well."

When I was in Guatemala last week, I went back and read what Jesus said about the growth of His church. He compared His kingdom to a tiny mustard seed. Although it is "smaller than all other seeds," Jesus said, "when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches" (Matt. 13:32, NASB).

What we do for the Lord will not impress the world. Our steps are small, our progress seems slow and our seeds are tiny. But you can take courage. In the end, those who mock God will be surprised when they see the size and the impact of the final global harvest.

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## **God Is Calling You to a Deeper Place**

Of all the places I visited in Israel last year, my favorite was Jacob's well—the spot where Jesus ministered to the Samaritan woman. The authenticity of many sites in the Holy Land are disputed, but nobody has any question about this

famous well, which is located in the modern city of Nablus in the West Bank.

Now housed inside a Greek Orthodox church, the well is carved into solid rock. Visitors are allowed to lower a container down into the well, bring up water and drink it. I was fascinated by how long it took to retrieve the water. And when I poured some of it back into the well, I waited several seconds to hear a faint splash. This well is 131 feet deep—the equivalent of a nine-story building.

I was in awe. Jesus actually sat in that same spot where I was standing! And that was where he told the woman of Samaria in John 4:13-14: “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water that I shall give him will become in him a well of water springing up into eternal life.”

Jesus sat next to a deep well—a well that represented the faith of the Jewish patriarchs. Yet He told this woman that there was something more. Something better. Something deeper than she had ever imagined. Jacob’s well was deep, but Jesus calls us so much deeper. His words to the Samaritan woman made her thirstier and thirstier. And her decision to believe in the Messiah resulted in an entire village embracing faith in Him.

You may never visit Jacob’s well in Nablus, but He calls you to explore the depths of who He is. He is calling His church in this hour to leave the shallowness of superficial Christianity. Regardless of what you have experienced before, He offers more. He beckons you to go deeper.

The apostle Paul experienced miracles, received help from angels, heard the audible voice of Jesus and saw visions of the third heaven. Yet he wrote of “the unfathomable riches of Christ” in Ephesians 3:8b (NASB). The Greek word for

“unfathomable” can also mean “untraceable” or “beyond comprehension.”

Paul used this same imagery when he prayed for the Ephesians that they would be able to comprehend “what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18-19). Do you desire to experience this fullness? Do you want to increase your capacity to know Christ? Or are you satisfied to stay where you are?

God is stirring my soul these days. I relate to the psalmist who wrote, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:2a). And as his passion intensified, he said in verse 7: “Deep calls to deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and Your billows passed over me.” When we choose to go deeper, the journey will become more intense. Spiritual growth is not easy. We must press through all resistance.

How much labor was required to bore a well 131 feet deep into solid rock? I don’t know how many years or how much sweat was required, but I know the water didn’t spring up overnight. Salvation is free, but a deep relationship with Christ takes time—and many Christians give up and settle for a mediocre experience.

God is waiting for a response from you. I noticed recently that Jesus did not call Peter to walk on water until Peter first asked for the miracle. Peter said: “Lord, if it is You, bid me to come to You on the water” (Matt. 14:28b). Only then did Jesus say: “Come!”

Jesus wants you to walk on the waves with Him. He invites us all to experience a miraculous adventure of faith. But He waits for us to want it. Some of us are frightened by the waves, so we live in the perpetual comfort zone and never ask for more. We are scared of more. And too often, everyone around us looks perfectly comfortable.

Many decades ago, revivalist A.W. Tozer challenged American Christians to stoke the fires of spiritual passion. He wrote: "Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth. Acute desire must be present or there will be no manifestation of Christ to His people. He waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us He waits so long, so very long, in vain."

I wonder what Tozer would think if he saw our level of spiritual hunger. Few believers today are willing to bore deep to discover the depths of God's "more." We are smug and satisfied. I dare you to get out of your boat today and say to Jesus: "Bid me to come to You on the water." Leave your fear, complacency and selfishness behind and begin drinking from the depths.

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## **God Is Calling All Gideons Out of Hiding!**

During one of the darkest times in ancient Israel, Midianite invaders began a campaign of terror. Everybody was hiding in caves and mountain strongholds. They had seen the Lord do miracles in the past to deliver Israel, but this time, they lost all faith.

But then the angel of the Lord visited a frightened young man named Gideon who was hiding in a winepress. Gideon assumed God had given up on Israel. I'm sure he was shocked when the angel greeted him by saying, "The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor" (Judg. 6:12b). He thought the angel was talking to the wrong person.

Warrior? Gideon felt like a wimp. Yet the angel announced that God had recruited Gideon to be a deliverer for the nation—and

Gideon wasn't having it! He gave the angel several reasons why he wasn't qualified. "How shall I deliver Israel?" Gideon asked. "Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house" (Judg. 6:15b, NASB).

Gideon was trying to become history's first draft dodger. But the Lord ignored each of his lame excuses. Finally, after a series of dramatic confirmations—including fire from heaven—Gideon suited up and headed to the battle. And he and his small band of 300 soldiers supernaturally defeated the Midianite hordes. The story proves that one person who trusts God is more powerful than the majority.

Wherever I go these days, I find that many Christians are in hiding. They may attend church. They listen to sermons. They sing worship songs along with everyone else in the congregation. But in their hearts, they have gone AWOL when it comes to actively engaging in ministry.

They are timid spectators, waiting for someone else to act. They have disengaged. They don't believe God can use them. Like Gideon, they have a list of excuses: I've made too many mistakes. I'm too old. I'm too young. My family is a mess. I'm divorced. I don't have any training. I struggle with addictions. I have too many doubts and hang-ups. I think God is disappointed with me.

This past weekend while I was preaching in a church in Georgia, I heard the Holy Spirit say, "I am calling all Gideons out of their hiding places!" This is the time for the weak to say I am strong. This is the time for spectators to get back in the game. We are heading into a fierce spiritual conflict, and we need all hands on deck!

Gideon's story is in the Bible because every one of us is like him. All of us struggle to believe that God wants to use us to carry His message and His power to a broken world. All of us are tempted to hide in our caves.

Yet God puts His Holy Spirit in imperfect vessels! The apostle Paul told the Corinthians: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” (2 Cor. 4:7). If you have been in hiding, crawl out of your cave and take these important steps:

**1. Let go of your shame.** Many Christians don’t believe Jesus has forgiven them fully for their past sins. The devil loves to replay our sins over and over so we will wallow in condemnation. You must believe God’s Word and renounce the devil’s lies. Your sins have been washed away, and you have been made righteous.

**2. Swallow your fears.** Fear can paralyze. It will stop you from every taking a risk. Yet the Bible promises: “God has not given us the spirit of fear” (2 Tim. 1:7a, MEV). Gideon started out as a fearful man, but in the end, he became a champion. You can experience the same transformation.

**3. Stop disqualifying yourself.** I have met so many followers of Christ who think they are not really on the team. They hide in the shadows, take the back seats in church and never volunteer to do anything because they see themselves as misfits. Don’t you realize God loves to take failures and make them successful? If He can restore Peter—who denied Him three times—and make him an apostle, can’t He redeem your past mistakes?

**4. Tear off every label.** So many of us were programmed for defeat by our past experiences. Friends, teachers, bosses or family members may have belittled you. Bullies may have told you that you are stupid, ugly, irresponsible or useless. But those people do not have the ultimate power to define you. Let God heal you of those wounds.

**5. Embrace your new identity.** When Gideon had his encounter with the angel, he received a new name. He was called

“Jerubbaal,” which means, “Let Baal contend against him” (Judg. 6:32b, NASB). The name clearly meant that Gideon became a serious threat after he struck down the false god Baal. The wimp had become a warrior!

Please stop hiding in the shadows. The alarm has sounded. We need you to suit up and run to the battle.

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## **God Wants to Put Jonathans in Your Life**

A few days ago, I was dreading the upcoming weekend. I didn't want to think about Father's Day—partly because it was the second year since my father had died, and partly because my elderly mother's health is failing. I honestly felt like crawling in a hole. But instead of stuffing my pain, I asked some of my friends to send me an encouraging text or video to cheer me up.

You may think that sounds like a selfish request, but my friends didn't see it that way. The texts began flooding my phone on Sunday morning, and they came throughout the day. I saved every message, and I've been reading them over and over. Their words literally lifted me out of a pit of discouragement.

I honestly don't think I could survive without my friends. Yet as I travel and meet Christians all over the country, I find that the church today is actually a very lonely place. Many people have experienced total relationship shutdown. Some have walked through painful church splits, others have been betrayed by friends they trusted, and still others have closed their hearts entirely to avoid being hurt.

It's as if we forgot how to have true friends. I've met pastors who've told me they just can't risk building friendships. So they live in isolation. They bear their own burdens. They get no encouragement. Some end up in depression.

Recently, the Holy Spirit drew me to study the friendship that developed between David and Jonathan during David's early years. It is clear from the biblical record that God put Jonathan in David's life at a crucial time in his journey to the throne. And if it were not for Jonathan's covenant relationship with his friend, David would never have been able to overcome the obstacles he faced during the reign of King Saul.

The same is true for all of us. You'll never achieve your maximum spiritual potential without the help of the key relationships God places around you. Yet in order to benefit from these friendships, you must open your heart and take the risk of being a friend.

How can you move from being isolated to developing close friendships? Proverbs 18:24a says: "A man who has friends must show himself friendly." You can't wait for a friend to reach out to you. Take the first step and be willing to break the stalemate. British preacher Charles Spurgeon put it this way: "Any man can selfishly desire to have a Jonathan; but he is on the right track who desires to find out a David to whom he can be a Jonathan."

Here are six qualities I see in Jonathan that challenge me to be a better friend:

**1. Jonathan nurtured a spiritual bond.** After David killed Goliath and moved to Saul's palace, the Bible says "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David" (1 Sam. 18:1, NKJV). This is the work of the Holy Spirit. All Christians should experience a sense of family connection, but there are certain friends you will feel deeply connected to because God

is putting you in each other's lives for a reason. Don't resist this process. Let God knit you to people.

**2. Jonathan showed sacrificial love.** Jonathan loved David so much that he risked his life to help him fulfill his mission. Jonathan even dodged Saul's spear in his effort to help his friend. He lived in the spirit of Jesus' words about friendship: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13, NLT). The world says we should only care about our own success. But the best way to become more like Jesus is to help someone else succeed!

**3. Jonathan always offered encouragement.** When David was fleeing from Saul in the wilderness, Jonathan traveled to Horesh to cheer up his friend (1 Sam. 23:16). There were times in David's life when he had to encourage himself, but in this case, Jonathan was God's instrument. We need each other! If you allow the Holy Spirit to speak life and hope through you, your words can propel your friends into their destiny.

**4. Jonathan offered his friend protection.** When Jonathan realized his father was plotting to kill David, he not only warned him of danger, but he concocted a plan to deliver his friend (1 Sam. 19:1-4). Friends don't let friends get massacred in spiritual warfare. If you see a friend making a foolish mistake, or if you sense the enemy is targeting him or her, God can use you to avert a disaster. Speak the truth in love.

**5. Jonathan kept his friend's pain confidential.** David confided in his friend Jonathan, and in some cases, he poured out his heart in frustration. At one point he said to Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my iniquity?" (1 Sam. 20:1a). When I'm going through a difficult trial, I sometimes just need to vent. I have loyal friends who let me process my pain—and they don't run and tell others else about my weakness. This is true friendship.

**6. Jonathan harbored no jealousy.** At one point in David's journey, Jonathan realized his friend would one day be king of Israel. This was actually Jonathan's inheritance, since he was Saul's son, but he acknowledged that God had chosen David instead. So he gave David his royal robe, his armor and his weapons (see 1 Sam. 18:3-4).

This is a beautiful picture of how we are to prefer and honor each other. Jealousy destroys friendship. If we have God's love in our hearts, we will want our friends to surpass us.

If you've been hurt in previous relationships, break out of your isolation and ask God to heal your heart. Then choose to be a Jonathan to someone else.

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## **How to Stay Renewed in the Spirit, Even in Old Age**

A few months ago, I preached at the historic Belmont Church in Nashville, Tennessee, a congregation that God used powerfully to spread charismatic renewal across the world in the 1970s. This was the church that gave us actor Pat Boone, Christian singers Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith, and many anointed songwriters and outreach ministries.

For years, Belmont was led by Don Finto, a brave spiritual pioneer who was willing to challenge old denominational mindsets after he had a profound experience with the Holy Spirit as a leader in the Church of Christ. Finto "retired" from his pulpit at Belmont in 1996, but he didn't even begin to slow down. He launched Caleb Company, an aptly named ministry that focuses on mentoring and outreach to Middle Eastern countries.

I interviewed Finto on the phone for *Charisma* a few times over the years, but I met him for the first time during my visit to Belmont. He was seated in the second row, beaming with all the energy of a 30-year-old. If you ask him his age, he emphatically says, "I'm 89 years young."

My good friend, Paul Gonzalez, who serves as Belmont's teaching pastor, told me Finto traveled to the Middle East in February with a team from the church. After the team finished its mission and flew back to the United States, Finto flew on to a few other countries. He is a true road warrior.

"Papa Don keeps the pace of a man half his age," Gonzalez says. "He carries boundless joy. Nearly everything he says he does so with a hearty laugh."

What's the secret to this kind of youthful energy in old age? Finto embodies principles that many of us need to grab now. Do you want to live long and finish strong? Here are a few tips:

**Keep yourself physically fit.** Unless you are intentional about exercising regularly and eating healthy now, your body won't be strong in your 90s. If you carry around a lot of extra weight in your 40s, your heart or joints may fail—even in your 50s. Make a decision today to treat your body like a temple of the Holy Spirit so you can live longer.

**Let God's passions become yours.** People who are consumed with God's purposes have an inner drive that renews them. Isaiah 40:31 says it best: "But those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint." An intentional focus on Jesus will give you extra energy—and the same boundless joy that makes Finto laugh so much.

British Christian leader George Mueller demonstrated this youthful energy in old age. When he was 70, he embarked on a 17-year period of missionary travel that took him to 33

countries. (This was before air travel, so he sailed on slow-moving ships.) It was a passion to share Christ with the world that kept Mueller moving at a frenetic pace until age 87. He died at 92.

**Hang around young people and invest in them.** Finto is known in Nashville as a mentor to younger leaders. Even though he turned Belmont Church over to his successors more than 20 years ago, he continues to provide coaching and fatherly counsel to the next generation. You are more likely to find him mentoring and worshipping with a group of 20-somethings than playing shuffleboard with retirees.

**Stay in step with the Holy Spirit.** Finto made a decision long ago to move with the cloud of the Holy Spirit. When the charismatic renewal hit this country in the 1970s, he didn't dig in his heels and cling to old religious wineskins. He broke away from Church of Christ traditions and moved the church into a season of fruitful growth.

Finto is a modern Caleb—and he reminds me of that biblical patriarch. Caleb said at age 85: “I am still as strong today as I was on the day that Moses sent me. My strength is now just like my strength then, both for battle and for going out and returning” (Josh. 14:11). Caleb never looked for a comfort zone. He never parked on yesterday's victories. He was always looking for the next challenge and eager to embrace the new thing God is doing.

No matter how old you are, I hope you will decide to live a life of spiritual passion. Don't let life grow dull. Let the Holy Spirit renew your strength until your last breath. {eoa}

**Lee Grady** was editor of *Charisma* for 11 years and now serves as contributing editor. He directs *The Mordecai Project* (), an international ministry that protects women and girls from gender-based violence. His latest book is *Set My Heart on Fire* (Charisma House).

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## **Will We Ever Stop Arguing About Women Preachers?**

*Editor's Note: We are reposting this story because of its continued pertinence although the events mentioned are no longer current.*

Two months after violent storms tore through Alabama, another huge tempest is raging there this week—and this one threatens to blow apart the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention have been meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, and this time, the issue of women's ordination is the tornado.

Prior to this week's two-day meeting, controversy began to swirl when popular Bible teacher Beth Moore, a Southern Baptist, mentioned in a tweet that she would be preaching at a Mother's Day church service. A group of male SBC leaders who are "complementarians"—those who oppose women in the pulpit—began expressing concerns that Moore was scheduled to speak on a panel during the conference on June 12.

Owen Strachan, a professor at the SBC's Midwestern Baptist Seminary, warned that Moore has no business preaching in front of a mixed congregation. "For a woman to teach and preach to adult men is to defy God's Word," Strachan said. "Elders must

not allow such a sinful practice.”

Strachan wasn't subtle. He is implying that Beth Moore is engaged in a “sinful practice” because she dares to preach in a church on a Sunday.

Not all Southern Baptists march in lockstep over this issue. Some insist that women can never teach men. Others say it's OK for women to teach as long as they don't function as pastors. And others think it's okay for women to speak as long as they aren't preaching on a Sunday morning in a church. Meanwhile, others are hoping the SBC will relax its rules on female ordination.

Catherine Booth found herself in the middle of this controversy more than 150 years ago. A powerful preacher in her own right, she founded the Salvation Army with her husband, William, in 1865. At that time many staunch critics of women preachers were telling her that it was “unfeminine” for her to preach the gospel. So in 1859 she wrote a pamphlet, “Female Teaching: Women's Right to Preach the Gospel.”

Booth's writing is still one of the clearest defenses of a woman's right to preach ever penned. Yet her critics continued to throw tomatoes and apples at her when she spoke on street corners in London while wearing her signature bonnet. Not only did she eloquently dissect the words of the apostle Paul to prove that he had women preachers on his team (Priscilla, Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche and others), but Booth asked a powerful question: If God were against women preachers, why does it seem the Holy Spirit is blessing the ministry of women who speak publicly?

Catherine Booth's critics dismissed her. But her legacy is legendary. She introduced more alcoholics, homeless people and marginalized maids and seamstresses to Jesus Christ than any of her forgotten critics. And the denomination she and her husband founded has 1.7 million members today, and an

international outreach to the poor.

Booth often quoted Acts 2:17a, which says: “‘In the last days it shall be,’ says God, ‘that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.’” For Mrs. Booth, this was the Emancipation Proclamation for women in the church. It clearly states that women will speak for God after the coming of the Holy Spirit’s power.

What does “your daughters will prophesy” mean if it doesn’t mean they will preach? Does it mean they can preach only outside the church? Does it mean they are only sanctioned to conduct Bible studies for women? Does it mean they can preach as long as they don’t stand behind a Plexiglas pulpit? Does it mean they can preach as long as there are no “adult men” in the audience?

I don’t believe Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 was about limitation. I don’t think Acts 2:17 contains an asterisk with a footnote that says, “\*Only in certain situations.” Acts 2:17 is about freedom. Pentecost removed the gender barrier.

Our manmade restrictions sound silly. If God has said, “Your daughters will prophesy,” why are we so afraid of giving anointed women a platform? How does allowing a gifted Bible teacher like Beth Moore to preach or teach in a church on a Sunday morning harm the cause of Jesus? I love to hear her teaching any day of the week.

I’ve been defending women’s right to preach for 25 years, and I’m convinced it is the devil who is working overtime to keep Spirit-filled women out of the pulpit. Satan is terrified of what will happen when women who are called by God are released to fully obey that calling.

We will reach more people for Jesus if we empower both men and women to carry this gospel. Let’s quit arguing about this. We will take more ground together. {eoa}

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## **8 Ways Global Christianity Is Different From America's Church**

This week, I'm on my 132nd international mission trip. I'm traveling in Central Asia with a group of Russian-speaking immigrants who live in the United States. We've been encouraging local Christians in two countries where it's not easy to live for Jesus. And as I've eaten local food, visited local churches and listened to the struggles of local pastors, I am seeing the world through their eyes.

My American friends often ask me how the church overseas is different from ours. Of course that depends on which part of the world I'm visiting. But I can say unequivocally that (1) most Americans have no idea how blessed we are, and (2) the global church struggles in ways we don't understand.

This week while traveling in a van on bumpy roads, I asked my Slavic team members how the global church differs from the American church. They all grew up in the former Soviet Union, and they came to America to flee religious persecution. Together we compiled this list of differences:

- 1. Christianity has a high cost.** In most countries of the world there are negative consequences for anyone who

follows Jesus. Some lose jobs or are denied promotions. Some experience harassment, eviction, fines or arrest. And a growing number of believers worldwide are martyred—mostly because Christianity is growing in hostile areas. Jesus' words in John 15:19 are so relevant to the majority of Christians today: "But because you are not of the world ... the world hates you."

- 2. Bibles, Christian books and theological education are rare.** Americans have access to a treasure trove of spiritual resources. We have seminaries, Bible colleges, unrestricted Christian broadcasting, unlimited access to Christian books and music, and more Bibles than we can read. But in many of the countries I visit, one Christian book is treated like a prized commodity.

Are you thankful for your copy of the Scriptures? The nation of Turkmenistan did not get a Bible in its native language until 2016—yet there are huge challenges to distributing it in a country that is closed to the gospel. Uzbekistan did not get access to the full Bible until 2018.

- 3. The global church doesn't rely so much on buildings.** I met a pastor from China who told me that he had to limit his congregation to 75 people because they had to meet in a small office. The government did not allow him to build a sanctuary. But because so many people were being converted, he had to start a new church every four months. I have preached in churches that meet in apartments, stores, huts with thatched roofs, caves, front yards, warehouses and on hillsides.
- 4. There are restrictions on what can be preached.** In several countries I've visited recently, American preachers have been permanently banned because they said things from a pulpit that are offensive to other religions. In many countries, local governments monitor what is preached in churches. Remember that the next

time you rant on social media to protest whatever you want. I hope you value your right of free speech.

5. **Economic hardship makes ministry difficult.** Many of my African pastor friends make less in one year than I make in a month. I know a pastor in Malawi who only gets the equivalent of 50 cents in his weekly church offering. In the United States, we base our church budgets on tithes from faithful donors. But how does a church in Uganda operate when members put chickens or bags of rice in the offering? Financial stress is one reason many pastors overseas suffer from burnout.
6. **There is a serious lack of emotional support.** In the United States we refer people in church to a variety of counseling resources. We have grief support, divorce care, family counseling, marriage counseling and rehabilitation centers for addicts or domestic violence victims. Many of these programs are non-existent overseas. People simply survive—or die prematurely because healing isn't available.
7. **Spiritual hunger is intense.** No matter where I go in the developing world, I find that people are desperate for God's presence. At one church I preached at in Barranquilla, Colombia, more than 1,000 people packed a church for a 6 a.m. service! When I preached at a church in rural Uganda, people who couldn't find a seat in the church put chairs outside the windows and sat in the hot sun to hear God's Word. That would never happen in our comfortable American bubble.
8. **Most global churches rely on the supernatural power of God.** No matter where I go overseas, Christians line up for prayer for healing. Miracles are common. And it's normal for someone to receive deliverance from a demon—with screaming—in a Sunday service. In the United States, we prefer strobe lights with wide screens and

cool graphics instead of unscripted bursts of Pentecostal power. We have our schedule to follow. We want things to be neat and tidy. We don't want the sudden, messy interruptions of the Holy Spirit.

I'll always be an American, but I carry the global church in my heart. We have so much we can give them. But more than that, they have so much to teach us. {eoa}

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## **Don't Settle for Shallow Relationships**

I don't like goodbyes, especially on the mission field. If you know me, you know that sometimes I get emotional in airports. Two weeks ago, it was bad when I left Singapore.

I had spent two weeks with people from nine different churches, and I invested a lot of time and energy encouraging the people—including members of Indian, Filipino and Indonesian congregations. I poured my life into a group of young disciples: Alberto, Peter, Billy, Hani, Sireesh, Chee, Chaundra and Tim.

I also reconnected with so many wonderful leaders, including Sanford, Anna, Naomi, Yang, Haziël, Brenda, Nelson, Jonathan, Joshua and Leslie. We shared meals. We prayed together. We experienced the bond of the Holy Spirit.

When it was time for me to go through the security checkpoint at the airport, some of these people came to see me off—and a few stayed until almost 2 a.m., when it was time for me to check in. I gained composure after I reached my seat on the airplane.

But I felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest.

Why do we feel such strong connections with our spiritual family? It's because Christianity, at its core, is about relationships. Our faith is not a solo act. We are not only baptized into a solitary relationship with God; we are baptized into His corporate body, the church. God calls us to follow Him with a loving community, not in lonely isolation.

Difficult goodbyes have become a normal part of my Christian experience. The apostle Paul had this dilemma, too. He missed people desperately.

He told the Romans: "For I long to see you" (Rom. 1:11a). He told the Thessalonians: "So having great love toward you ... you were dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). He told Timothy: "I long to see you again, for I remember your tears as we parted. And I will be filled with joy when we are together again" (2 Tim. 1:4, NLT).

Paul's gospel, and ours, flows from the heart. Our faith is based on the astounding truth that a loving God came to earth to repair our broken relationship with Him. And since then, God has sent people across oceans and mountain ranges to tell others about His love. They have often had to endure painful goodbyes.

Jesus modeled this affectionate love by investing time in His disciples. He didn't float around on a pillow like Yoda while dispensing otherworldly wisdom. He hiked through Israel with His friends. They got their feet dirty together. He fished with them, ate with them and just hung out with them.

Mark 3:14b (NASB) says Jesus appointed the twelve “so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach.” Notice that His relationship with them was not just about the task of ministry. He wanted their fellowship!

We get this backwards today. We tend to value religious performance, yet we are often bankrupt when it comes to friendships. We sit together in countless meetings but never open our hearts to each other. Even ministers have admitted to me that they have no friends. We’ve created a robotic, programmatic, clinical Christianity that counts heads but lacks the heart of New Testament love.

I tossed out that sterile version of Christianity a long time ago. I’ve learned that ministry is not about getting big crowds, filling seats, tabulating response cards or eliciting raucous applause. It’s not about running on the church-growth treadmill. Religion that focuses on externals is dry and performance-based. Real Christianity is warm and slobbery.

How would you assess your current relationships? Intimate? Professional? Distant? Cold? Do you have close friends? Do you live out your faith in solitary confinement? Or have you pulled away from close relationships in the church because someone hurt you?

I challenge Christians all over the world that they need three kinds of relationships in their lives, in addition to their closest family relationships:

1. **Pauls** are spiritual fathers and mothers you trust. All of us need older, wiser Christians who can guide us, pray for us and offer counsel. My mentors have encouraged me when I wanted to quit and pushed me forward when I lost sight of God’s promises. God gave Ruth a Naomi and Joshua a Moses. Ask the Lord for a mentor.
2. **Barnabases** are spiritual peers who are bosom friends.

They know everything about you, yet they love you anyway. They are also willing to kick your tail if necessary! They provide accountability in areas of personal temptation. And they will stay up all night praying for you when you face a crisis.

3. **Timothys** are the younger Christians you are helping to grow. Jesus never told us to assemble crowds, but He did command us to make disciples. Relational discipleship takes a lot of time and energy, but investing your life in others is one of the most fulfilling experiences in life. Once you have poured your life into another brother or sister and watched them mature in Christ, you will never settle for superficial religion again.

Jesus said it best when He told His followers: “No longer do I call you slaves ... but I have called you friends, for all things I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). The Christian life is a vibrant, friendship with God—but it doesn’t end there. Open your heart and discover the people around you.

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## **Unborn Babies Can't Carry Protest Signs**

Thanks to a law passed in January in the state of New York, a woman can have an abortion up until the very moment of childbirth. And when that law was passed, lawmakers threw a party by covering the World Trade Center in New York City with celebratory pink lights.

Meanwhile a law passed this month in Georgia says it's a crime for a woman to get an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, when a fetal heartbeat can be detected. As soon as this so-

called Heartbeat Bill was passed, Hollywood directors, producers and actors including Rosie O'Donnell, Amy Schumer, Sean Penn and Alec Baldwin vowed to stop making their films in the state.

Welcome to 2019, the year when the already-polarizing issue of abortion threatens to split our nation in half.

So far this year, a dozen states have enacted restrictive abortion laws designed to challenge the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling that legalized abortion. Aside from laws passed in Ohio, Missouri, Kentucky, Mississippi, Georgia and Louisiana, Alabama's governor signed a bill last week that not only limits abortion to the first six weeks of pregnancy but also outlaws abortions performed because of rape, incest or the health of the mother.

I personally believe the Alabama law goes way too far. No law can be considered "pro-life" if it doesn't also protect the life of the pregnant woman. And no woman should be forced to carry a baby if a man forced himself on her.

But I have a difficult time understanding why our nation is so determined to deny unborn children the right to life. America has a history of defending the rights of women, slaves, child workers, oppressed laborers, marginalized races, poor immigrants and gay people—not to mention whales, sea turtles and other endangered species. Yet today we pass laws that allow mothers to kill full-term infants—and we pat ourselves on the back for being "progressive."

Before New York passed the Reproductive Health Act in January, any abortion after the 12th week of pregnancy had to be performed in a hospital, and any abortion after 20 weeks had to be overseen by a physician in case the infant was born alive. Under the new law there are no such requirements. The law is silent on the issue of a baby born alive.

New York's law effectively rules that unborn babies are not

really human beings until they emerge from the womb and take a breath. Until that moment, there is an open season on them. You can kill at will.

And this is what abortion proponents hope will be the law in all 50 states. They want unlimited, wholesale elimination of unwanted “fetal tissue.”

I don't expect that my Christian convictions on this topic will convince the most militant abortion activists to change their opinions. They will keep marching with signs that say, “Get Your Laws Off My Uterus.” (And besides, they don't think I have any say in this matter since I'm a man.) But I will always maintain—regardless of what the Supreme Court rules—that an unborn life also has rights.

I was in high school when Roe v. Wade was enacted. Yet even at age 15, I understood that a fetus is a life in formation and that it deserves protection. I don't know at exactly what week in gestation it can be considered a legal person. (Is it when a heartbeat is detected? Is it when fingers and fingerprints are developed?) But I do know that it is sinister to kill an unborn baby just before it emerges from the womb.

The Bible is clear that an unborn life has unique value and purpose. David wrote: “You brought my inner parts into being; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will praise you, for You made me with fear and wonder” (Ps. 139:13-14a). The psalmist understood that God's hand is involved in the miracle of gestation—and that this alone makes an unborn life sacred.

God also told Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I sanctified you, and I ordained you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). From this passage we derive a clear understanding that an unborn life is so much more than a glob of cells; a baby in the womb carries a God-given destiny.

In this divisive season, I hope we will all search our hearts.

Amid today's clamor for "reproductive rights," we need to ask if unborn children have any say in this debate. They cannot carry protest signs, stage rallies or shout questions during congressional hearings. They have been trampled. But if we could hear their muffled cries, I believe they would be saying, "Please let us live."

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## **The 10 Biggest Mistakes to Avoid in Mentoring**

I just returned from a two-week trip to Singapore, where I preached in eight different churches. I enjoyed every opportunity to speak to crowds, but the most fulfilling part of the journey was not the public meetings. What brought the most satisfaction was mentoring the five guys who accompanied me on the trip—Alberto, Hani, Sireesh, Billy and Peter.

The most satisfying moment of the trip occurred last Sunday night, when I watched Alberto pray for a group of people at the conclusion of a service. I've been mentoring Alberto for two years, so I was thrilled to see him stepping out to invest in others. This is the power of mentoring: When you spend quality time with a disciple, they will grow spiritually and eventually become mentors themselves.

Mentoring is a fundamental biblical concept, but it has become a lost art in today's megachurch scene. Moses mentored Joshua, Naomi mentored Ruth, Elijah mentored Elisha and Paul poured his life into Timothy. But today we prefer an impersonal, assembly-line approach to training rather than the more time-consuming, one-on-one strategy.

I've made mentoring my priority because I believe God prefers

quality over quantity. Even though Jesus did lots of crowd ministry, He devoted most of His time to training His core group. And He did such a good job of preparing His small band of disciples that He told them they would do “greater works” than He did (see John 14:12). An effective mentor allows his disciple to stand on his shoulders and surpass him.

This week, my disciple Alberto was inspired to mentor some of the new converts we prayed for in last weekend’s meeting. Then he begged me for some coaching. He specifically asked if I could create a list of mistakes to avoid in mentoring. Here they are:

**1. Don’t ignore communication from your disciple.** Discipleship requires your time. Answer calls or texts and make sure your disciple knows you are accessible.

**2. Don’t act disgusted if they confess serious sin.** True emotional healing requires transparency and repentance. But you must show mercy and sensitivity when your disciple decides to bare his or her soul.

**3. Don’t ever break confidence.** I’ve met Christians who closed their hearts and even stopped going to church because a pastor or a mentor blabbed about confessions they shared privately. If the person you are mentoring trusts you enough to admit their deepest struggles, be a faithful steward with that information. It is not yours to share with anyone else.

**4. Don’t baby your disciples.** You must treat your disciples as adults. Don’t coddle them or spoil them. The apostle Paul said: “When I became a man I put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11b). You’ll never lead people to spiritual health if you treat them like kids. Expect growth and maturity.

**5. Don’t avoid confrontation.** In this era of “hyper-grace” theology, some Christians have backed away of any form of tough love because they’re afraid of appearing narrow-minded or legalistic. You must get over this fear. If you truly love

your disciples, you will lovingly but firmly correct them when necessary.

**6. Don't control or manipulate.** You are not running your disciples' lives. Your job is to help them hear from God for themselves—not to hear from God for them.

**7. Don't be possessive.** Your goal as a mentor is to serve your disciple and to help him or her grow. But you are not the only person they need in their lives. Leave room for friends and other mentors, and don't be jealous if they go to someone else for help.

**8. Don't allow the relationship to become codependent.** You must always point your disciples to Jesus. Don't allow them to develop an unhealthy reliance upon you. And never try to get your emotional needs met in a discipleship relationship.

**9. Don't ever exploit your disciples financially.** Over the years I've met pastors or mentors who asked their mentees to join their "downline" in a network marketing business or to invest in buying clubs or foreign currency schemes. This is a huge mistake. Using a mentoring relationship to enrich yourself contradicts everything Jesus said about purity of heart.

**10. Don't ever give up on your disciple.** Can you imagine Jesus kicking Peter to the curb after he denied Him? No, Jesus didn't disqualify Peter for his sin—He restored him. Stick with your disciples during good times and bad, and even if they have serious moral failures. Love them, forgive them and never stop praying for them. Be a mentor for a lifetime.