

How India's 'Untouchables' Are Stirring a Spiritual Revolution

India's economy is growing, and its population may soon overtake China as the world's largest. But behind these trends is something much bigger: Christianity is growing faster than government leaders will admit, and the spiritual changes are reshaping a nation that has been identified with Hinduism for thousands of years.

I saw this with my own eyes this week. A miracle is occurring in India that will shake the world in our lifetime.

What is most remarkable about the growth of Christianity in India is that the people spreading the gospel most aggressively are not foreign missionaries but indigenous evangelists who have been stuck at the bottom of the oppressive caste system.

Consider the case of my friend Prasad, who is a Dalit—otherwise known as an “untouchable.” Defying his background, he planted a church in a major city in southern India 20 years ago. Today he oversees more than 100 churches in his region, and he provides hot meals to 1,500 poor children every day at 20 feeding centers where the gospel is served along with rice and vegetables.

Another young pastor named David, who was trained by Prasad, recently moved into a one-room apartment in a slum community on the outskirts of a major Indian city. With a monthly income of less than \$200, he and his wife are aggressively sharing Christ with children and adults. Both Muslims and Hindus are converting to Christianity because of the courage of a man who is classified by the caste system as “backward.”

Further south, in a region of India that is known for its ornate Hindu temples, a young evangelist named Raja operates a home for abandoned girls, provides food and clothes to neglected orphans and offers counseling to abused shop workers. He and his brave team use motorcycles to reach remote villages in tribal areas where many of the local Hindus are highly resistant to other religions. Even though he has been pelted with rocks and threatened, Raja has planted churches in 32 communities.

The cruel “untouchable” label was pinned on Prasad, David and Raja when they were growing up. Hinduism teaches that Dalits are outcasts who deserve to be at the bottom of the spiritual scale of human worth. Even though India supposedly outlawed the caste system years ago, Dalits still suffer horribly through social stigma, denial of education, bullying and discrimination in housing and jobs.

Yet despite the continued oppression, Dalits are the key reason the gospel is spreading so quickly in India today. The same people who were told they weren’t worthy enough to enter a Hindu temple are finding that Jesus Christ touched lepers, sinners and other “untouchables” of His day and invited them to dine at His table.

Everywhere I went in India this past week, I met people from the lowest caste background whose lives have been transformed by Christ. They have found true value and dignity after meeting Jesus.

And I was happy to worship with them, hug them, eat with them and remind them that there is no caste system in God’s kingdom.

An intense spiritual war rages in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was elected in 2014 as a self-avowed Hindu hardliner, is working with his pro-Hindu government to stop Christianity’s growth (as well as the growth of Islam). Acts

of violence against Christians—including the burning of churches—have increased so much that Open Doors now lists India’s persecution status as “severe.”

But the violence isn’t stopping Dalit believers. As I ministered to groups of pastors this week, it was obvious that they have pulled the rug out from under the old system of Indian oppression. We can expect sweeping changes in India in our generation:

- **The caste system will disintegrate.** Wherever Christianity goes, true prosperity follows. Today, born-again Dalits are getting high-tech jobs and graduate degrees; the underdogs are overcoming a system that was rigged to oppress them. The more Christianity grows, the more the caste system is becoming irrelevant.
- **The killing of baby girls will stop.** At least 60 million female babies have gone “missing” in recent years because of either sex-selection abortion or infanticide. This is because many families simply prefer boys for economic reasons, so they killed their baby girls. As early as 1991, the Indian Census began to show a dramatic drop in the girl-to-boy ratio. But today, Christians are rescuing abandoned girls from trash bins and raising them to love Jesus.
- **The status of women will shift.** In the past, Indian women have suffered silently from domestic abuse, social discrimination and sexual slavery. High-profile cases of violent rapes in the past few years have tarnished India’s global reputation. But now Indian Christians are challenging the dowry system—a tradition that requires families of girls to pay exorbitant fees to their prospective husbands. As Christianity spreads in India, the gospel is elevating the dignity of women, and Christians are educating girls and empowering them to be leaders.

My time in India this week convinced me that we will see a

massive miracle unfold in India in our lifetime. A nation that was rigged to favor the rich is literally being turned upside down because poor “untouchables” have been touched by Christ.

6 Wrong Ways to Leave a Church

My friend “Stewart” (not his real name) is one of the friendliest pastors I know—and his wife is also an exemplary leader. But a few years ago, they began getting emails from an anonymous church member. The messages were severely critical and laced with threats. Then a small package arrived at the church. It was filled with a white powder.

Stewart called the police to be on the safe side—and the powder turned out to be yeast. The pastor and his wife learned firsthand that the ominous messages and the package came from a former member who was upset. The person’s odd behavior proved that some Christians don’t act like Christians when they decide to leave a church.

Many of my pastor friends have similar stories of people who leave churches in dramatic and inappropriate ways. They all recognize that this is one of the most serious occupational hazards of ministry. Pastors are going to feel rejected when people leave, even when God is leading those people to make an exit. But if you are directed by the Holy Spirit to leave a church, please do it the right way.

1. Don’t leave mad. If you are leaving because you are angry at the pastor or another member, you are proving your immaturity. Offense is never a reason to leave a church. Jesus told us to go to the person who offends us (Matt. 18:15). And

Proverbs 19:11 says: “The discretion of a man defers his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” If you break a relationship every time you are offended, you will never grow up. Even if you are called to leave a church, you should never hold a grudge. Have the courage to face your offense and disarm it.

2. Don't leave and make threats. Some people get so angry, they want to hurt the church when they leave. They want the pastor to suffer. One man told a pastor I know that he hoped the church would go bankrupt after he stopped tithing to it. (Instead, God sent other people whose donations more than covered the lost income!) Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves.” Even if the pastor or church members are doing inappropriate things, it is not your job to punish them.

3. Don't leave secretly. When I was a boy, my mother taught me to say: “I enjoyed my meal. May I be excused?” when I finished eating. I was not allowed to leave the table without this announcement. A similar rule applies to leaving a church. It's rude to walk out with no explanation. Your pastor deserves to know why. You can write a letter, but it's better to say it in person—and to include some words of thanks for the way the church has helped you in the past.

4. Don't leave and talk about it on social media. Proverbs 6:19 says God hates the one who “sows discord among brethren.” Those are strong words! Some people actually think they are doing God's work by badmouthing a pastor, but they are digging a ditch that they will soon fall into. Keep your judgments to yourself. Posting the details of your rant on Facebook only shows how petty and self-centered you are.

5. Don't leave and try to take others with you. If God is calling you to switch churches, that's fine. God will bless your transition if you do it in a healthy way. But if you try to stage a massive walkout, you are undermining God's authority. Don't allow the enemy to use you as an agent of

division.

6. Don't leave and stay away from church altogether. I have often heard people say they feel God is leading them to leave a church to go elsewhere. But then I find out, after three years, that "elsewhere" really meant "nowhere." They quit church altogether! This is usually a sign of either deep disappointment or an unresolved conflict. You should never, ever give up on church. It is God's family. No Christian should live in isolation.

Obviously there are times when we must leave a church. It happens because of job transfers, family issues, ministry preferences, driving distance and many other reasons. And some churches have unresolved problems that make them unhealthy—and God does not necessarily require us to stay there. The Holy Spirit is the one who directs us to the right congregation.

Good pastors know they cannot hold onto people in a possessive way. Healthy churches remind people that the exit door is unlocked, and that members are free to go as the Holy Spirit leads. Deuteronomy 28:6 says: "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out." Pastors should bless people who leave—but members should leave in a respectful way that invites that blessing.

The Powerful Prophetic Message of 'Woodlawn'

I rarely endorse films, and I don't get any benefit from movie companies if I do. But I loved the movie *Woodlawn* so much that I am telling everybody to see it before it leaves the local Cineplex. You will want to buy the DVD too, even if you aren't

a fan of high school football. *Woodlawn* is the most unapologetically Christian film I've ever seen because it maintains an artful quality without ever becoming cheesy.

American audiences are starved for films with positive messages that reinforce Christian faith instead of mocking it, and Hollywood has noticed that faith-based movies are getting better. *War Room* has already made \$66 million since it released in August. Other faith-based films are due out in the next few months, including *The 33* (about the miraculous 2010 rescue of Chilean miners, due in theaters Nov. 13) and *Risen* (about an unbelieving Roman soldier who investigates the resurrection of Jesus, out Jan. 22, 2016).

But *Woodlawn*, produced by Andrew and Jon Erwin, gets my vote for the best Christian film of the year because its message has relevance far outside the walls of the church. And it carries a prophetic message about the time we live in—which is really not that different from the turmoil of the early 1970s.

The film is set in 1973 in Birmingham, Alabama—at a time when local schools are required to desegregate. Racial tensions have reached the breaking point at Woodlawn High, a white school that suddenly must accommodate blacks. Students, parents, coaches and the school's principal are all on edge.

People who remember the era of desegregation may also recall that another movement was stirring in America. *Time* magazine called it the Jesus Revolution. In *Woodlawn*, the two movements collide.

The school's football coach, Tandy Gerelds (played by Nic Bishop), is trying to get his black and white players to get along, with no success. Then an unassuming evangelist named Hank (played convincingly by Sean Astin of *Lord of the Rings*) asks if he can give a pep talk to the boys in the school gymnasium. When he does, almost every guy on the team gives his life to Jesus.

“What just happened?” a baffled Coach Gerelds asks his assistant coach. Later in the film, Hank gives the answer: “This is what happens when God shows up.”

The film is based on true events and focuses on the life of one student, Tony Nathan (played by Caleb Castille), who becomes the first black football player for Woodlawn High. When he stands in the gym with the rest of his players and becomes a committed Christian, he doesn't realize he's joined a spiritual revolution. But with the word “BELIEVE” scribbled on the back of his helmet, and his index finger raised high to proclaim Jesus as the “one way” to heaven, he leads his team to unexpected victories—not only against opposing teams but also against a vile spirit of racism that has pervaded Birmingham.

The movie gets a special boost from veteran actor Jon Voight, who plays University of Alabama coach Paul “Bear” Bryant. He goes looking to recruit Nathan to play for the Crimson Tide, and in the process is impressed with the young man's faith. After someone burns a cross in front of Nathan's home, Bryant pays a visit and tells him: “You know the difference between you and these people? They're cowards. And you ain't.”

Woodlawn is 100 percent inspiration, but it never stoops to being sugar-coated—even when Coach Gerelds walks into a black church and tells the folks he has given his heart to Christ. You could show this film in a Sunday school class, but it has just as much appeal to secular audiences because the acting is first-class, the production values are masterful and the anti-racism message is as needed today as it was in 1973. It's similar in tone to *Remember the Titans* or *The Blind Side*, but neither of those films have this much heart.

The film also includes actual footage of a Billy Graham sermon at Explo '72, a huge gathering of young Christians that took place in Dallas and galvanized the Jesus movement. Those images reminded me that during one of the darkest times in

American history—when white supremacists were bombing churches in the South and police were spraying black protesters with fire hoses—the gospel was being preached as the only means to achieve racial healing.

Historians have already proven that the young people who came to Christ during the Jesus movement eventually became the leaders of today's church. It was the most powerful move of God in our lifetime. For me, *Woodlawn* not only chronicles how God poured out His Spirit in one school in Alabama—it also reminds me that He can and will do it again.

Don't Let Superstition Have Power Over You

We live in the 21st century, but every Oct. 31 Americans unknowingly return to their medieval roots. Halloween can be traced to ancient Ireland, where people believed that the spirits of the dead roamed the earth on the last day of October.

The ancient Celtic people carved out turnips and put candles inside them to ward off ghosts and demons. Today, our methods are more glamorous—and expensive. America will spend \$8 billion on Halloween—with \$2.5 billion of that on costumes alone. We will also spend \$30 million on costumes for pets—and millions more on candy and pumpkins.

And all this started with superstition.

Some superstitions are harmless lies invented by ignorant people. When I was a boy living in Alabama, some friends told me that if I ate a watermelon seed, a watermelon would grow in

my stomach. It was a Southern folk legend that created fear in me until I realized it wasn't true.

Some people I know grew up believing it is bad luck if they break a mirror. Others refused to step on a crack in the sidewalk for fear that this will bring bad luck. There are people who believe the sight of an ambulance is an evil omen.

And anyone who ever watched the movie *The Ring* might be tempted to believe that if you watch television in a dark room at night, a creepy, dark-haired girl might crawl out of the screen! Superstition breeds fear, and fear has the power to control.

Do you have any superstitions that you need to renounce? Here are a few of the most common superstitions in our culture today:

1. Friday the 13th. The movie franchise with the same name was about a masked murderer named Jason who killed teenagers on the fated Friday. That could be one reason why there is actually a clinical name for fear of Friday the 13th. It's called *triskaidekaphobia*. But the idea that Friday the 13th is bad luck developed centuries ago.

Ancient Romans believed witches gathered in covens of 12, and that the devil was the 13th person present. Early Christians associated 13 with Judas. Fear of the number 13 is so common in our culture that people avoid traveling on Friday the 13th, and some airlines don't have the 13th row on planes because so many superstitious people don't want to sit there.

2. Black cats. Legend says you will have bad luck if you see a black cat or if one passes in front of you. The notion is rooted in a medieval idea that witches could transform themselves into cats. It sounds crazy, but the fact remains that black cats, as well as black dogs, are least likely to be adopted from animal shelters because people today still fear them.

3. Horoscopes. For centuries, people in various cultures have believed the movement of the planets and stars control their destiny. Astrology is big business around the world. In mega-superstitious Italy, for example, people spend more than \$5.5 billion annually on horoscopes. A 2009 Harris Poll showed that 26 percent of Americans believe in astrology, and 21 percent of those horoscope watchers described themselves as born-again Christians.

Astrology is also huge in China, where one-third of its people say astrology is an absolute science. In some Chinese companies, applicants are sometimes hired or denied jobs because of their zodiac signs.

4. Chain letters. Back in the day, people mailed silly notes demanding that the reader must mail multiple copies to friends. The opening line usually said: "You will have amazing luck this week if you send this letter to 200 people by Friday." The letter promised good luck to those who complied, and bad luck to disbelievers who threw it away.

Nowadays, the practice has been resurrected on social media. Have you ever forwarded a message on Facebook simply because the sender threatened bad luck if you didn't post his message? If you reposted, you were acting out of superstition.

5. A rabbit's foot. In medieval times people believed that if you could sever the left hind foot of a rabbit that had been shot in a cemetery on the night of a full moon, you would have good luck. Huh? That crazy notion is why rabbit's foot key chains are so popular today. If you think having a rabbit's foot will help you find the right mate, the best job or more money, you are guilty of idolatry.

Do you hold any superstitious ideas? The Bible tells us clearly that if we give our lives to Christ, He protects us and guides us. We do not have to fear the devil, demons, animals or inanimate objects around us. We can say:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom will I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom will I be afraid?” (Ps. 27:1). God wants you to have a life free from fear.

We do not have to perform rituals to get good luck or to avoid bad luck. We don't need animal parts, icons, crucifixes, salt, sand, clovers, lucky charms or bone fragments to bring us luck. We don't put our trust in the stars, the moon or planets to show us what to do. If we know and serve God, we look to Him alone for His blessings and guidance.

If you realize you have been a slave to superstitious fears, renounce them today, throw away any objects associated with your superstition and declare your full allegiance to Christ. You can pray something like this:

“Father, I acknowledge that You are the only true God. I put my trust in You alone. You paid for my salvation with the blood of Your Son, Jesus Christ. I am no longer a slave to fear. I renounce these superstitions in Jesus' name, and I ask You to break the power of fear and tradition off of my life. You are my shield and my defender, and the devil cannot touch me because my life is hidden in You. Amen.” {eoa}

6 Warning Signs of Spiritual Abuse

The church is called Word of Life Christian Center, but the tiny Pentecostal congregation in New Hartford, New York, is now known for death. It made headlines earlier this month when a 19-year-old member, Lucas Leonard, died during a so-called “counseling session” that involved 10 hours of beatings and

interrogation.

Six members of the church now face criminal charges for the incident, which also left Lucas' 17-year-old brother, Christopher, hospitalized. Most of the group's 20 members were afraid to speak to the media. But a former member, Chadwick Handville, who now lives in Arizona, told *The New York Times* that the church had become a cult.

"Everybody who's gone there is a victim of abuse," Handville said. "This was a cult. This was not a church; I don't care what words they use on the building. The spirit of that place was not freedom."

How does this happen? Handville said Word of Life was not always unhealthy. But founder Jerry Irwin reportedly used manipulation, shaming, heavy-handed threats and even sleep deprivation to control the lives of church members. Even the parents of the young man who died felt helpless to stop the fatal beatings because members were never allowed to question church leadership.

How can we stop such an incident from happening again? We must recognize the warning signs of spiritual abuse—and be willing to challenge unhealthy leadership practices before they lead to tragedy. Here are six ways spiritual abuse operates:

1. An authoritarian leadership style. God calls church leaders to be servant-hearted, tender and compassionate. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he did not "have dominion over your faith" (2 Cor. 1:24), but that he served in humility alongside them. Immature, untested leaders don't know how to serve, and they end up wounding people with their harsh demands, threats and dominating attitudes. You can be certain that authoritarian leaders do not submit their lives to anyone; they are Lone Rangers, and they are unfit to be pastors.

2. A secretive atmosphere. The word *occult* actually means

“secret.” And secrecy is always a hallmark of a spiritually abusive church. Leaders are not open about their own lives, they don’t allow members to question anything and the financial records of the church are closed. A healthy pastor encourages openness, welcomes input and invites participation. You can be certain that if there is secrecy in a church, there is something to hide. Don’t submit yourself to such a system.

3. Spiritual elitism. It’s interesting that most cult-like churches don’t grow to be large. In the case of Word of Life in New York, it had shrunk to 20 extremely loyal members. But in a spiritually toxic environment, members are told they are the “elect few” or the “green berets” who are spiritually superior to others. Spiritually abusive churches often bash other denominations, insisting that their doctrines are better. This becomes a breeding ground for strange teachings.

4. Financial manipulation. There’s nothing wrong with a church asking for money. God wants us to use our resources to fund the spreading of the gospel and to support its ministers. But in unhealthy churches, people are coerced, berated or threatened at offering time. I knew of a pastor who tracked his members’ finances and personally demanded that they give their annual tax refund checks in the offering. This is spiritual extortion. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says giving should be done cheerfully and without compulsion.

5. No respect for personal liberty. I knew of a pastor who demanded that his assistant come to his house in the wee hours of the morning to take dictation for sermons—as if he could not write his own study notes! I have also been in situations where church volunteers were forced to work unreasonably long hours. In the case of Word of Life in New York, members were expected to put in long hours renovating the pastor’s home. Mature Christian leaders, like the apostle Paul, view themselves as “bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5)—and they would never treat people like slaves. If you see slavery in your church, you can be sure the Holy Spirit is grieved.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty!

6. Hyper-spirituality. Leaders who have not been properly trained or mentored will overcompensate for their lack of experience by pretending to have an inside track to God. Insecurity breeds pride. And in charismatic churches where we believe in supernatural guidance, this pride can open the door for weird forms of abuse. Before too long, the super-spiritual leader will invent excuses for his bad behavior by saying that “God told him” to do unreasonable or unbiblical things. When a leader claims an inside track to God but never surrounds himself with godly counselors, watch out! He is headed for a train wreck.

The tragedy in New York could have been avoided if members of Word of Life Christian Center had challenged the leader’s controlling behavior. In the case of this unhealthy church, a young life could have been spared. Don’t ever submit to spiritual abuse. If your church is becoming cult-like, get out—and get your friends out before someone gets hurt.

Tell Me Again About Your First-World Problems

Americans are blessed in so many ways, and we should be the most thankful people on earth. But we quickly show our ingratitude when our Internet signal gets weak or when our iTunes download takes too long. Our first-world “problems” are pitiful. We complain of cramped seating on planes when only a tiny percentage of the world’s population has ever flown.

I’m not pointing the finger at everyone else. I’ve been guilty of whining about silly stuff that doesn’t belong in the

problem category. So God sends people into my life to remind me about the real world.

This week I spent six days with my friend Peace Pound from Lilongwe, Malawi. This year, at age 48, he took his first trip on an airplane. He is the first man from his village to visit the United States.

Peace was raised in a nominally Muslim family. His father died when he was three, so his mother had to take care of him and his seven siblings. They lived in a one-room hut with a thatched roof, and they usually ate nothing but msima, a corn porridge, and fish they caught from Lake Malawi. Occasionally he was fortunate enough to eat some goat meat. He slept on a mat made of palm leaves.

When he was a child, Peace only had one pair of shorts to wear—and no underwear. The shorts were tattered from repetitive use. He remembers once washing his shorts to rid them of lice and then hanging them next to the fireplace to dry. When he woke up the next day the shorts had burned to ashes, so a friend gave him an extra pair—until the friend's mother found out and reclaimed the clothing. He had to wear a vegetable sack to cover himself.

Peace's family had no electricity and no running water. He bathed in the lake, his mother washed clothes in the lake, and he drank his water from the same lake. He did not have a toothbrush or toothpaste, so he used sand to clean his teeth. He and his brothers and sisters were not allowed to attend school because local Muslim elders said pork was served to the students. So Peace never learned to read or write.

As a child, Peace had no toys, no bike and certainly no video games. He and his friends would act out dramas to entertain themselves. Often they asked Peace to pretend he was John Chilembwe, a national hero who challenged British rule in Malawi after he was educated in the United States.

Peace had little access to medical care, so if he got sick his mother would visit a local herbalist to buy a cheap remedy. One day his eyes got infected so his mother tied a rag around his head to keep his eyes from popping out of his head. He cannot see out of his left eye today. He also walks with a pronounced limp because of a serious car accident that put him in the hospital for more than three years.

After such a difficult life, Peace heard the gospel 20 years ago and he gave his life to Jesus. He made a living (less than 50 cents a month) herding goats. He eventually left that job to help his local church in Lilongwe with evangelism.

Peace wanted to go to Bible college, but that seemed impossible because he was illiterate. "I decided to pray like Moses, that God would give me an Aaron to help me," Peace said. Then God opened up the door for him to attend a theological school in Zimbabwe, and a friend there translated the lessons from English to Peace's native Chichewa language. He took his exams orally.

In 1996 he graduated with a degree in biblical studies. He is the first man from his village to get a diploma.

He got his first pair of shoes when he was 26. He got his first phone three years ago.

Today, Peace has planted more than 10 churches, including a congregation in neighboring Mozambique that has grown to more than 300 members, and another in Zambia. He has never owned a car, a bicycle or a horse (he says "horses are for very rich people"). He takes a bus to do his mission work, or walks up to 10 miles to reach local churches.

Once, Muslims who didn't want Peace to bring the gospel to their village beat him up. But opposition has never stopped him. And when I visited Kenya six years ago, Peace rode on a bus for four days to meet me—so that he could ask me to come to his country to preach.

I took my first trip to Malawi in 2013 and will return there next year. On my next trip I hope I will visit the lakeside village where a poor African boy in tattered clothes dreamed of coming to America. His story will always remind me that I have nothing to complain about. {eoa}

The Urgent Crisis of the Young American Male

Just one day before a crazed young gunman killed nine people in Oregon last week, police arrested four males who planned to go on a bloody rampage at their high school in central California. Fortunately those four juveniles are now in custody—but it doesn't lessen the pain of the families who lost loved ones in the Umpqua Community College shooting in Oregon.

What is happening? Why are so many disturbed young men in the United States carrying out massacres? Consider these four recent cases:

1. Christopher Harper-Mercer, 26, killed nine people at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, Oct. 1, 2015, using five handguns and a rifle. He killed himself after the rampage. An unemployed loner, his parents were divorced and he lived with his mother. He suffered from mental disorders, and neighbors said he sometimes paced the floor of his apartment until 4 a.m. According to posts online, he was fascinated with guns and frustrated that he didn't have a girlfriend. When he broke into a classroom last week he asked some students if they were Christians before shooting them in the head.

2. Dylann Storm Roof, 21, is an avowed white supremacist who

shot and killed nine people, including a pastor, in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015. He used a .45-caliber Glock pistol. His mother left his father before he was born, and his father was later accused of abusing his second wife. A high school dropout, Dylann used drugs, showed signs of obsessive compulsive disorder and was convinced that African-Americans are taking over the world. In his online posts he talked of starting a civil war. He will stand trial in July 2016.

3. Elliot Rodger, 22, went on a bloody rampage on the University of California/Santa Barbara campus on May 23, 2014. First he stabbed three Chinese men (two of them his roommates), then he shot three students at a sorority house using three semi-automatic pistols. Then he killed himself. Coming from a divorced home, he was described by those who knew him as a loner who had been bullied in school. In a video he posted on YouTube just before his shooting spree, he said he wanted to punish women who had rejected him, and to punish sexually active males because they had a more enjoyable life.

4. Adam Lanza, 20, was responsible for storming into the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on Dec. 14, 2012, and killing 20 first-graders and six adults. He murdered his mother first, then used her rifle to shoot his victims, and then killed himself. After the incident, investigators learned that Adam suffered from numerous mental problems. He loved horror movies and was fascinated by mass killings. Adam had had a strained relationship with his father since his parents separated in 2002.

A growing number of young men—even teens—are snapping. What is causing this?

The debate rages today about gun control—and certainly a case can be made that these men should never have had access to handguns or rifles. But this dilemma can't be solved simply by stricter background checks. (Elliot Rodger, for example,

stabbed three of his victims with a knife, one of them 94 times. In other cases, they used guns owned by family members.)

In the cases I've described, each young man came from a broken home marked by abuse, rejection or neglect. Each was tormented by inner demons that caused him to be fascinated with conspiracies, weapons and violence. And after each massacre, people who knew these young men said they detected that they were deeply disturbed and needed intervention.

Other factors may have played a role, including drugs, video games, violent entertainment and broken relationships. But one clear factor is mental illness and an obvious lack of support for families that struggle with this problem. A lot of young men in this country today are battling anxiety, compulsive behaviors and serious psychological problems, and we can't sit back and wait for politicians to solve this.

We need spiritual answers—and the church must step up to the plate to provide more help to people like Christopher, Dylann, Elliot and Adam before they reach the breaking point. That's why I'm grateful California Pastor Rick Warren and his wife, Kay (whose 27-year-old son battled depression and committed suicide in 2013), have organized a conference on mental illness that begins today. The Gathering on Mental Health and the Church will convene at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, Oct. 7-9.

"It's time to break the silence and stigma surrounding mental illness," says Kay Warren. "Every church, regardless of size or location, can be a place of refuge and love and compassion for those who need it most."

Hopefully Saddleback's willingness to apply the gospel to this taboo topic will result in a wave of healing in this country. For too long we have ignored this complicated problem—or we've deliberately swept it under the rug. The church should be the

place where families go to find answers to mental illness—and not after a school massacre but before it happens.

For more information on the Gathering on Mental Health and the Church, go to mentalhealthandthechurch.com. {eoa}

What Donald Trump Doesn't Get About Immigrants

This week I preached at a pastors' conference in Brookings, South Dakota. Before I arrived I assumed the sponsoring church, Holy Life Tabernacle, would be a mostly white congregation, since South Dakota is 82 percent white. But, when I walked into the Sunday service, I was greeted by Ghanaians, Rwandans, Nigerians and Congolese, most of them students or professionals who had recently moved to this small community north of Sioux Falls.

There were so many internationals in the service that I decided to ask everyone who had been born in another country to stand. There were more than 75 foreigners attending the church that day—about one-third of the congregation. Even pastor David Kaufman and his wife, Jeanne, who have been sharing Christ on the local university campus for years, were surprised to see how many foreigners have made Holy Life their home church.

That Sunday I made sure these internationals felt appreciated. "I want to say to each of you: Welcome to the United States!" I told them. "We are glad you are here!" They all smiled and clapped—and the Ghanaians cheered when I noted that they had the largest group.

I will be honest: The reason I so eagerly welcomed these immigrants is that I'm absolutely ashamed of the way many Americans act toward our foreign friends. And the current presidential campaign is not helping.

Case in point: Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump—who seems to thrive on being intentionally offensive—insulted all Mexicans this past summer when he claimed that immigrants entering the United States from Mexico are a bad influence on our country. He said: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

To make his jabs even more hurtful, Trump told audiences that if he becomes president he will deport the entire undocumented population and end the practice of giving citizenship to children born to foreigners on U.S. soil. Trump said in July: “I will build a great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall.”

I've been a Republican since I began voting at age 18. But Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric is enough to make me forfeit my association with the GOP. It's a shame that a candidate who claims to care about the future of the United States would be so hateful toward people who came to this country looking for the American dream. It's even worse that Trump's attitude is shared by some Christians who should know better.

There are three things we should remember about immigrants:

1. Immigrants are a blessing to our nation. Trump either slept through history class or he has a very short memory. America was shaped by immigrants—those who came from Ireland, Italy, Poland and Norway in the 1800s; the Hmong and Vietnamese refugees of the 1970s; and the Latinos, Africans and Indians coming here today. Immigrants start small businesses and stimulate the economy. Contrary to what Mr. Trump believes, immigrants do not breed crime; studies show that they are actually less likely to be jailed for a crime than U.S.-born

citizens.

2. The church is called to welcome and care for foreigners.

The Bible commands us: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19:34a). Our immigration policies should be tempered by kindness and a desire to share our blessings, not hoard them from the poor or less fortunate. In August a Donald Trump supporter told Hispanic reporter Jorge Ramos—who is a U.S. citizen—to “get out of my country.” He might as well have waved a swastika flag. The incident indicated that some of Trump’s fans are promoting a sick, racist nationalism that could fuel anti-immigrant violence. Christians should be modeling the opposite.

3. God has a prophetic purpose for immigrants. Mr. Trump believes he can just build a wall to keep Mexicans out of our country. But what if God wants to bring Mexicans to the United States for His purpose? What if He wants to create a haven of protection in our country for refugees from Syria? The apostle Paul preached that it is the sovereign God who created the nations and “appointed fixed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17:26). We could actually find ourselves fighting God if we resist showing kindness to the immigrants God wants us to protect.

Many Americans today fear that immigrants are coming here to spread crime or terrorism. Of course we have to be vigilant to prevent Islamic extremists or violent gangs from entering this country. And of course we can’t just let anyone set up camp within our borders without enforcing the law. But let’s not forget that some of the worst terrorism on U.S. soil was carried out by crazed U.S. citizens, including white supremacist Dylann Roof who shot nine African-American Christians in a South Carolina church last June. Our biggest threat of violence is not from outsiders.

The Christian community should be standing in solidarity with

the huddled masses of immigrants who come to our country seeking a better life. Shame on Donald Trump and any other political candidate who wants to slam the door on foreigners.

You Can't Buy Blessings With a 'Day of Atonement' Offering

Television preacher Steve Munsey says today is the most important day in the history of the world. He promises TV viewers that if you give your biggest offering on Sept. 23—on the Yom Kippur holiday—you will be healed of cancer, get out of debt and see your children return to faith.

Munsey even hints that you could become unbelievably wealthy if you follow his careful instructions. He recently announced on evangelist Benny Hinn's *This Is Your Day* program: "You're not going to become a millionaire. You're going to become a billionaire! But you must move now!"

The secret to obtaining this miracle? You must believe that God bestows special answers to prayer on Yom Kippur, the most important day on the Jewish calendar. And to unlock this blessing, you must bring a big offering in both hands. Suggested donation: \$300.

Most casual channel-surfers who hear Munsey's slick sales pitch will quickly detect that something funky is going on behind the curtain. The Chicago-based pastor is selling spiritual blessings with the same hypnotic skills of a used car salesman. What's tragic is that millions of Christians who should have the discernment to know better are being duped by this circus sideshow.

Munsey is not running this show alone. He is often featured on the largest Christian TV channels in the country, and this month he has pushed his Day of Atonement Offering message on programs sponsored by Hinn as well as evangelist Rod Parsley. In each case, “operators are standing by” to take calls from donors who are ready to win their blessings. Computer-savvy viewers are urged to donate online.

Forgive us, God, for turning the precious gospel message into a lottery—and for allowing charlatans to extort money from naive people.

For those who might be tempted to believe Munsey’s flawed theology, consider some basic truths from Scripture:

1. You don’t have to give money in an offering to obtain a spiritual blessing. TV preachers often stoop to gimmicks and manipulation in order to get donations. One of their favorite methods is to suggest that you can “unlock your miracle” by giving an offering. This is heresy. I often give offerings to my church, missionaries and charitable causes, but my generosity has nothing to do with God’s blessings in my life. Salvation, healing, deliverance and answered prayers are all free. You don’t have to bribe God or pay Him off.

2. God is not more active on the Day of Atonement compared to other days. Munsey has built his ministry on the idea that the Jewish feast days mentioned in the Bible are special, and that God shows special favor to those who celebrate them. This is in direct opposition to the core of the gospel, which tells us that we are made righteous not by following the law but by faith in Christ alone (see Gal. 2:16). The apostle Paul warned that if we ever think we can be saved by our works, we have been “bewitched” (Gal. 3:1).

It is true that we can gain spiritual insights by studying the Old Testament feasts—which all point to the ministry of Jesus. The Day of Atonement, for example, reflects how Christ entered

into heaven with His blood and paid for our sins. But we do not have to celebrate this feast on Sept. 23 in order to gain the benefits of it. In the New Covenant age, every day offers the blessings of Christ's atonement!

3. You could suffer spiritual harm by listening to a false teacher. The apostle Peter rebuked the Samaritan sorcerer named Simon because he offered money to obtain an anointing from the Holy Spirit. Peter said: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could purchase the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:20).

But we have a problem today: We have church leaders who invite modern-day Simons on their TV programs and allow them to teach. These preachers are putting themselves in a vulnerable position with God by giving a platform to heresy. If you build a ministry on falsehood, it will crumble.

Don't be deceived. God's blessings are not offered to us only on certain days a year. You don't have to wait for a "blood moon" to appear in the sky four times in a row to receive an answer to your prayers. Because Jesus made complete atonement for us, His forgiveness is free to all who believe. There's no offering necessary!

7 Quirky 'Doctrines' That Should Be Debunked

Jesus said the truth sets us free. But the opposite is also true: Lies put us in bondage—even if the lies are spoken from a pulpit by a sincere minister or a Christian celebrity.

In my international travels I've sat in countless meetings and

heard countless examples of bad theology. While traveling in Romania, for example, I discovered that women are sometimes told they cannot receive communion if they are having their menstrual period. (No one could explain to me how this prohibition is actually enforced.) In some Nigerian churches, it is taught that a pastor shouldn't have sex with his wife the night before he is scheduled to preach.

These are extreme examples of twisting or misunderstanding a Scripture (usually from the Old Testament) to create a religious rule. But this butchering of the Bible doesn't just happen in developing countries. It happens everywhere, creating religious superstitions that make us look silly to the world. Some of these concepts are repeated so often that they become a part of our Christianese lexicon. People nod and say "Amen" without realizing these statements have no basis in Scripture.

It would be impossible to list all of the quirky doctrines I've encountered during my years in ministry, but I'll start with these:

1. The children of ministers must carry on their parents work.

David passed his inheritance to Solomon, and Solomon gave his scepter to Rehoboam. Then somewhere along the way some pastors invented the idea of a monarchy in the church—teaching that ministers must be succeeded by their sons or daughters. This certainly can happen. But nowhere in the New Testament are we told it is a rule. Leaders are appointed and anointed by the Holy Spirit, not determined by family lineage.

2. Don't touch the Lord's anointed. David refused to kill King Saul when he had the opportunity because he feared God and waited for Him to vindicate him (see 1 Sam. 24:6). But this verse has been manipulated to discourage church members from asking honest questions about a leader's behavior or decisions. We are called to submit to our spiritual leaders, but it is not wrong to disagree with them as long as we have a

respectful attitude.

3. Christians who commit suicide go to hell. This idea has created untold pain in the church, especially in families with loved ones who suffer with mental illness. The idea is that a person can never be forgiven of suicide since they can't pray for forgiveness after they commit the sin. But the whole message of grace in the New Testament teaches us that God's love is greater than our moments of weakness, depression or mental instability. If our salvation totally hinges on whether we immediately pray for forgiveness after every transgression, then we are all doomed. Jesus paid for our sins, and those who trust Him will enter heaven in spite of their frailties and bad decisions.

4. The husband is the priest of the home. I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard this statement from a pulpit. Contrary to what many Christians believe, this is not a Scripture. Actually the Bible teaches clearly that we are all priests (1 Peter 1:9), and husbands and wives function together as priests for their family. It is a heresy to suggest that a wife must go "through" her husband to approach God. The Bible does say the husband is "head of the wife" (Eph. 5:23), but this implies connection and oneness, not domination or control.

5. Christians can receive "mantles" from other people. The prophet Elijah threw his mantle on his disciple Elisha so he could carry on his ministry (see 2 Kin. 2:13). Ever since this isolated incident occurred, people have been asking famous preachers to pray for them so they can "receive their mantle." Recently it was reported that some charismatics were going to the graves of revivalists to pray for their anointing to come upon them. That's silly. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit imparts his anointing. Someone may lay hands on us, but they don't have to be famous or have a big following. Let's stop worshiping people and seek the Holy Spirit's power instead.

6. "Jesus only" baptism. Early Pentecostals began a famous dispute during the early 1900s over the proper formula for water baptism. Some insisted that people should be baptized "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28:19. But a breakaway sect of "Oneness" Pentecostals insisted then, as they do today, that people must be baptized only "in the name of Jesus," as Acts 2:38 instructs. And Oneness believers teach that people who are not baptized according to their formula will not go to heaven. It's time to retire this hair-splitting argument and recognize that Christians are saved by their faith in Jesus alone, not by words recited at their baptism.

7. People with strong faith don't suffer. The oldest book in the Bible is Job—the ancient story of a faithful follower of God who endured suffering. Yet today we have dozens of famous televangelists who tell audiences they can confess their way out of trials and tribulations simply with positive thinking. Some even suggest you can buy your way out of difficulties by giving in their "miracle" offerings.

Never trust a preacher who promises you a shortcut around suffering. We must stop promoting a false gospel that offers instant success, fame and wealth. Jesus promised we would have trials (John 16:33), yet He gave us assurance that our faith in Him would help us overcome in the end. Let's preach the truth, expose the lies and break free from Christian superstitions.