

Study: Mature Believers Wanted

✖ According to a Barna survey of more than 1,000 Christians, more than half of all churchgoers can't describe how their church defines a mature believer. An overwhelming 81 percent believe spiritual maturity correlates to "trying hard to follow the rules described in the Bible," and even among born-again Christians (a small subset of the entire group polled), only 30 percent mentioned having a relationship with Jesus as one of the characteristics of spiritual maturity. Other elements included living a moral lifestyle (14 percent), applying the Bible (12 percent) and sharing your faith with others (6 percent).

Possibly more revealing than these statistics is the disconnect that exists within church leadership. Among pastors surveyed, nearly 90 percent said a lack of spiritual maturity was one of the nation's biggest problems-yet a minority of them stated that this wasn't the case in their own church.

Fewer than half of the churches represented have written documents defining, describing or outlining what a mature Christian is like. In addition, most pastors add to this ambiguity by using vague biblical references when actually trying to measure spiritual maturity. When asked to identify the most important portions of the Bible that define spiritual maturity, more than three-fourths gave a generic response: one-third simply answered "the whole Bible," 17 percent said "the gospels," 15 percent said "the New Testament," and 10 percent offered "Paul's letters" as their source of definition. Just one-fifth of pastors cited specific Bible verses that speak of a mature believer.

"America has a spiritual depth problem partly because the faith community does not have a robust definition of its

spiritual goals,” said Barna Group president David Kinnaman. “The study shows the need for new types of spiritual metrics. One new metric might be a renewed effort on the part of leaders to articulate the outcomes of spiritual growth.”

Such an effort begins with most pastors recognizing their systems of measurement is lacking. Yet further indicating the disconnect from reality, the majority of pastors surveyed were moderately satisfied with their current methods and standards. (Granted, only 9 percent were completely satisfied with how they measured and assess spiritual growth of those they lead.)

In light of this, Kinnaman offered a warning to any grow-quick solutions: “As people begin to realize that the concepts and practices of spiritual maturity have been underdeveloped, the Christian community is likely to enter a time of renewed emphasis on discipleship, soul care, the tensions of truth and grace, the so-called ‘fruits’ of the spiritual life and the practices of spiritual disciplines. A related challenge is that as spiritual formation becomes ‘trendy’ it will inevitably become ‘watered down’ with products that over-promise or are simply counter-productive. Leaders have to take on this issue more effectively, and part of that task is weeding out the good from bad.”