

Christian: It's More Than Just a Label

The latest issue of *American Scholar* magazine features on its cover a solitary man sitting in the front pew of a vast church, head in hands. About halfway back sits an older couple, while a lonely woman makes her way up the aisle. Empty pews fill the rest of the page.

The headline reads "The Empty Cathedral: Why Evangelical Christianity Is Going the Way of the Drive-In Movie." The cover line of the story asks a simple question: "Where are the people?"

Whether it's as dire as all that—and I'd argue that it's not, given the data—it can be easy to focus on an assumed crisis of faith in America while overlooking the more blistering and concerning reality: the lack of true disciples inside the church.

The Data Conundrum

First, let's consider the data.

A 2012 Gallup poll illustrates about three out of four Americans (77 percent) still identify as Christian. And about 137 million Americans, or 44 percent of the population, say they are part of a specific Christian congregation, according to the 2010 U.S. Religion Census. Most weekends, tens of millions of worshippers still attend churches. Even the lowest estimates show that about one in five Americans—or about 60 million people—show up in worship every week.

But I think we'd all agree that fewer follow Jesus. Fewer let their faith shape their lives or have deep spiritual resources to draw on when life gets hard.

Why is that?

I suspect many churches have forgotten their main calling: to make disciples. Instead, we believe drawing a crowd of people on Sundays is enough. We invite people to come to church or to be good people—but not to follow Jesus.

Sociologists like Christian Smith say many Americans follow something called “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a belief in God that’s mainly focused on being a good person and having a positive self-image.

That kind of religion feels good. But it doesn’t have staying power. And it doesn’t motivate people to act on their faith in areas where it costs them.

Take giving, for example. Empty Tomb, a Christian nonprofit that studies church giving, looked at donations from members of 23 of the largest Protestant groups in the U.S. and found the average church member donated 2.3 percent of their income in 2011. That’s down from 3.1 percent in 1968.

“Is the issue that the church is not providing an authentic alternative to the consumer mindset?” asks Sylvia Ronsvalle, executive vice president of Empty Tomb, in an interview with Religion News Service. “Over a period of time, if the church isn’t providing more of an authentic alternative, the church will lose.”

Churches can also suffer from what’s known as the 80/20 rule—the idea that 80 percent of the work gets done by 20 percent of the people. In their book *The Other 80 Percent*, authors Scott Thumma and Warren Bird say many church members see themselves as spectators today. They hold certain beliefs and often show up at church, but they don’t make a connection between faith and everyday life.

“Faith in Christ is not widely perceived as an active lifestyle that one attempts to live out every day in all one’s

actions,” they write. “Rather faith has become something that one can assent to but does not live, believe but does not follow, and belong to but does not support or participate in.”

In essence, Thumma and Bird suggest the word *Christian* has come to mean “someone who believes things about Jesus” rather than “a disciple who believes in and follows Jesus.”

If that’s the case, perhaps our expectations for church members have been skewed, because the number of disciples in America is far from the number of people who call themselves Christians.

Call It What It Is

The issue is nominalism—when someone is a Christian in name only. They call themselves Christians but are not disciples. They are not people who follow Jesus.

The obvious answer is that not everyone who calls themselves a Christian uses the word the way the Bible (and hopefully you and I) do. For many people, being Christian simply means being a good person. If I say, “That’s not very Christian of you,” it means “That is not very good of you.”

But *Christian* shouldn’t mean “good.” *Christian* should mean “changed by the power of the gospel”—repenting of sin and receiving new life in Christ. It should mean “walking to follow Jesus.”

I find it helpful to separate those who self-identify as Christian into three categories: cultural, congregational and convictional. About three-quarters of Americans identify as Christian, and for the sake of discussion, I’ll break them down into these three categories, each representing about 25 percent of the population.

1) CULTURAL CHRISTIANS. This first category is made up of people who believe themselves to be Christian simply because

their culture tells them they are. They are Christian by heritage. They may have religious roots in their family or come from a people group tied to a certain religion, like Southern evangelicals or Irish Catholics. Inside the church, we would say they are Christian in name only. They are not practicing a vibrant faith.

2) CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIANS. The second category is similar to the first group, except these individuals at least have some connection to congregational life. They have a home church they grew up in and perhaps where they were married. They might even visit occasionally. Here again, though, we would say these people are not practicing any sort of real, vibrant faith. They are attendees.

3) CONVICTIONAL CHRISTIANS. The final group is made up of people who actually live according to their faith. These are the people who would say they have met Jesus and that He changed their lives. They would say that their lives have been increasingly oriented around their faith in Him.

To be clear, I'm not saying cultural or congregational Christians aren't real Christians or that all in the convictional category have right convictions. That's not my place to judge, and I don't know the journey they are on. What I do know is there are a whole lot of people using the self-identification of *Christian* who are not living like disciples of Jesus.

What Do We Do?

Part of our job is to help people move from being cultural or congregational Christians to being fully committed disciples—to help people who see themselves as Christians actually live as disciples.

One way to do this is through a process known as *transformational discipleship*, which is based on one of the largest research projects on discipleship ever done in North

America. I was involved in the project as president of LifeWay Research, and as part of the project, we interviewed discipleship experts from eight countries and surveyed 1,000 pastors and more than 4,000 churchgoing Protestants from North America.

Here are some key truths we found as a result:

- **Discipleship has to be intentional.** We can't assume people are learning how to be a Christian just because they show up on Sundays. To develop spiritually, people need a plan that constantly asks, "Are you growing closer to Christ?" and gives them concrete steps to make that growth happen. The key is to help people develop habits and patterns of life to help them draw closer to Christ.

In his book *The Power of Habit*, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Charles Duhigg points to the example of Saddleback Church as a church that gives its people habits, such as Bible study and meeting in small groups, that help them grow spiritually.

"If you try to scare people into following Christ's example, it's not going to work for too long," Saddleback pastor Rick Warren told Duhigg in an interview for the book. "The only way you get people to take responsibility for their spiritual maturity is to teach them habits of faith. Once that happens, they become self-feeders. People follow Christ not because you've led them there, but because it's who they are."

- **Bible engagement is essential.** In our research, we found 90 percent of Protestant churchgoers say they want to please and honor Jesus in all that they do. But only one out of five (19 percent) say they read the Bible outside of church every day.

Nearly the same number (18 percent) say they rarely or never

read the Bible, while nearly a quarter (22 percent) only read the Scriptures once a month.

That kind of Bible engagement isn't likely to lead to mature faith. You simply won't grow if you don't know God and spend time in His Word. We found the more people read the Bible, the more likely they are to live out their faith as disciples of Christ.

- **Think small.** Many churches focus on getting bigger. I think it's time we focused on getting smaller—by drawing Christians into group settings where they can build deep and abiding friendships.

Churches need to move people from sitting in pews to sitting in circles, having face-to-face conversations in smaller groups about how to provoke one another to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24) and to live on mission in the world.

Sunday morning worship is crucial, but it does no good if people forget about Jesus once they leave the parking lot. They need community to keep them focused on discipleship the rest of the week.

- **Groups need a plan.** Once they're in that smaller community, people need a plan for growth. In our study of groups for LifeWay Research, we found that less than half of pastors have an intentional discipleship strategy for small groups. Their people meet together, but there's no plan in place for helping them grow spiritually. So while Christians find love and support in groups, they aren't often challenged to grow deeper in faith.

Ironically, the church in North America has more resources than ever before to reach the world for Christ. But it is going to take every believer living out their faith as a follower of Christ to make disciples who make disciples. Such disciples will live boldly in a world with growing secularism

and confused nominalism, pointing people to a Jesus that changes everything—and everyone.

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Ed Stetzer tackles how we can overcome the current discipleship deficiency and carry out the Great Commission at