

Got Discipleship?

Many American Christian leaders have rightly bemoaned one paradox of American life. It is this: America, by any reckoning in the world is a “religious” country. Almost 40 percent of the population are in church on any Sunday, and 75 percent say they are “Christian.”

Yet the overall impact of the Christian presence on the life of America is clearly weak and at times barely discernible at all. Christians just aren’t considered credible or taken very seriously by society at large.

Why? The answer is simple. Americans who say they are born-again Christians are failing to live lives that are recognizably different from those of the population at large.

Examples of this are legion. TV-watching hours are the same for evangelicals as for Americans in general. Divorce is now the same for Christians as non-Christians. More than half of so-called evangelicals don’t believe in absolute moral standards.

George Barna, a respected Christian researcher, is deeply sobered by it all. He finds that increasing numbers of Christians either don’t believe any form of immoral behavior is entirely unacceptable or tolerate anything as long as it is “legal.” He says that the gap in attitudes on moral issues between committed Christians and Americans at large tends to be barely more than 10 percent. That’s not enough.

Barna explains: “If you want to influence society you need to

be different by at least 20 percent [on key moral and ethical issues]." He says that among American churches today there is, overall, "no accountability, no suffering, no moral benchmarks." He is surely right.

Furthermore, since Old Testament times there seem to have been only two reliable antidotes to progressive moral decline among God's people. One is persecution. The other is repentance by the believers.

Old Testament prophets thundered out warnings of God's judgment if immoral behavior by the Israelites was not amended. Often prophet and people alike lived to see the warnings borne out.

In the Christian era, the equivalent often has been persecution. Before 1949, the church in China sometimes was referred to as "rice Christians"—people who joined simply for economic advantage.

But after more than half a century of persecution the Chinese church has grown faster than any in Christian history, producing heroic martyrs, leaders and teachers. Horrendous persecution in China during the 1950s and 1960s led first to the purification of the church, and then to one of the greatest outpourings of the Holy Spirit and growth in numbers in 2,000 years.

Now, no sane person would ever deliberately wish a fellow Christian to be persecuted. It's entirely possible, of course, that the Lord could see persecution of the church in America as the only way of purifying it and waking it up. But it's also sensible to believe that God is still patient and will

allow His people to return to moral wholeness by initiating our own repentance for our backslidden condition.

Where it must start, of course, is in Christian leadership. It must be the pastors and leaders who utter the call to repentance and who, in humility, demand that their flocks live out lives of Christian decency.

They must start demanding that those who claim to be church members demonstrate lives of visible moral purity. They should insist on tithing as the norm for Christian charity and a requirement for anyone seeking a leadership position in the church. And church members should support their pastors in requiring these standards of their flocks and in disciplining those who transgress them.

Does this sound like military discipline? Of course it does. But are we not fighting a spiritual war? What troops ever rallied to victory where no one respected or paid attention to the senior officers?

The time for Christian sloppiness, laziness, moral corruption and excuses is over. Let's be willing to be disciplined soldiers, and let's pray for God to raise up officers who will have the courage and discipline to lead us into this discipline.