

What's Right and Wrong With American Christianity

As I prepare to spend a week teaching the book of Jeremiah to Chinese pastors in Hong Kong, I've been reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the church in America. Regrettably, the list of negatives is longer than the list of positives.

To be clear, though, I'm speaking of the circles in which I travel, meaning evangelical Christian circles, so my observations might not apply to other Christian groups in America.

What are some of the strengths of the American evangelical church?

1) We are at the forefront of feeding the poor and providing disaster relief worldwide. From the earthquake in Haiti to the tsunami in Japan, and from orphanages in Latin America to feeding programs in Africa, organizations like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse are there, making a difference.

2) We are a generous people when it comes to funding gospel work in America and abroad. While we can sometimes be self-indulgent as we build our latest mega-edifice, we are a giving people overall.

3) We have produced an abundance of Christian resources. If you're looking for the latest translation of the Bible or a book on any aspect of Christian living, and if you'd like to download it to your phone, look no further.

4) We have a positive, can-do mentality. This is part of the American psyche, but it comports well with the biblical message of "All things are possible with God."

5) Our churches offer many practical programs to help everyone from recovering drug addicts to couples needing marital counseling. To this day, ministries like Teen Challenge, which help people with drug and alcohol addictions, put government organizations to shame in terms of consistent rates of success.

6) We are strongly pro-life and pro-morality. This is especially true compared to Christians in many other nations, who seem oblivious to the evil of abortion and who fail to take moral stands on other issues.

7) We are strongly pro-Israel. Even the Israeli Knesset recognizes that American evangelicals are its best friends in the world, although in recent years, some evangelicals have challenged this consistent support for Israel.

8) We have sent many missionaries to the nations, also providing them with financial support. Beginning in 1812, this has been a great part of our spiritual history, and it has not primarily been for the purpose colonizing foreign peoples or making them into Westerners.

What are some of the weaknesses of the American Evangelical Church?

1) Our Christian expression is often shallow and superficial. It has often been said that American Christianity is 3,000 miles wide and one mile deep.

2) We have been plagued with scandals among our leaders. Hardly a month (or week?) goes by without news of the moral failure of another one of our leaders.

3) We preach a carnal prosperity message. This is not the Protestant work ethic of old; it is the message of, "Jesus died on the cross to make me financially rich."

4) We export our false teaching around the world. The latest

teaching coming from professing evangelicals is that you can practice homosexuality and follow Jesus at the same time, and from our shores, this message is going to the nations.

5) We have created a worldly, cultural Christianity. Rather than preaching a Jesus who radically changes us, we preach a Jesus who radically empowers us. That's why we have "Christian" lingerie models and "Christian" rappers who frequent strip clubs.

6) We have perfected the gospel enterprise. We have learned how to make everything "Christian" and then market it. Someone once said, "What began as a movement in Jerusalem became a philosophy in Greece, a monument in Rome, a culture in Europe, and an enterprise in America."

7) We run our churches like businesses. It is one thing to implement good business principles where applicable, but our "corporate Christianity," especially in our bigger churches, is another thing, and the pastor has become the CEO.

8) We are self-dependent. Who needs God's help and we can make it happen on our own? If you want a performance, just visit our church on Sunday morning.

9) We are heavily politicized. Rather than being a prophetic witness to the society, calling on political leaders to do the right thing, we have sold our souls to the political system.

10) We have produced super-star preachers. Didn't Jesus teach that leaders were supposed to be the servants of all?

11) We are exceptionally gullible. Only in America can a TV minister be convicted of various kinds of scams, only to be back on TV racking in the big bucks and selling all kinds of cheap gospel gimmicks. We have confused simple faith with gullibility.

12) Our "pep talk gospel" is hardly the gospel at all. Being

positive and encouraging is great, but not when it comes at the expense of leaving out the rest of the message. Put another way, Jesus was not a motivational preacher.

The bad news is that the list of negatives can go on. The good news is that American history has been marked by great awakenings and revivals, and if ever we needed one, it is now.

My suspicion is that the next great awakening will also be quite a rude awakening.

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