

Big Blunders

When I was in Nigeria conducting interviews for this month's cover story,

I was invited to speak at a growing church that meets near a university in Lagos. Knowing that future church leaders would be in the audience that Sunday morning, I wanted to deposit something that could shape the destiny of Africa. My message was titled "Eight Mistakes the American Church Made That I Hope You Don't Repeat."

I don't have the kind of pulpit savvy that gets people shouting amens and waving handkerchiefs. Yet this sermon struck a chord not only with my new Nigerian friends, but also with Americans who heard about it when I returned. I am sharing the gist of the message with you because I know it's not too late to learn from our blunders. Here's my list of the American church's all-time biggest goofs:

*** We made unbelief a doctrine.** While Christians in China, Latin America and Africa were casting out devils and healing the sick, we were teaching seminary students that the Holy Spirit doesn't do miracles anymore. That's really bad theology.

*** We tolerated division.** Who needs the devil when Christians are perfectly OK with hating one another in the name of denominational loyalty? Why should the world listen to us teach about "family values" when the family of God is so fractured?

*** We cultivated a religious spirit.** We taught converts that Christianity is about daily Bible reading, church attendance and avoiding cigarettes and beer. Genuine faith became

drudgery. Christians trapped in dry legalism lost their joy because they thought intimacy with God could be achieved by their performance.

*** We encouraged “superstars.”** We elevated ministers to celebrity status, and some of them actually believed they deserved the titles, the pedestals, the grand entrances and the first-class seats next to Jesus’ throne. They stopped modeling servanthood, and as a result the church forgot that Jesus washed feet and rode on a donkey.

*** We equated money with success.** We taught that biblical prosperity could be obtained by inserting our tithes into a heavenly slot machine. Lotto fever spread throughout the church, and we found a way to legitimize greed and materialism when we should have been using our wealth to feed the poor, adopt orphans and fund missionary ventures.

*** We wouldn’t release women in ministry.** We let gender prejudice have more control in the church than the Holy Spirit. He’s ready to send an army of dedicated women to the front lines of spiritual battle—but He’s waiting for us to bury our stinking male pride.

*** We stayed in the pews and became irrelevant.** We insisted on letting a group of older white men in dark suits represent our faith in the marketplace, and we freaked out when somebody tried to use rap, punk or metal music to reach the younger generations. Instead of engaging the culture we hid from it.

*** We taught people to be escapists.** Jesus told us to occupy the planet until He returns. But most of us were reading

rapture novels when we should have been praying for our brothers and sisters who were on the verge of martyrdom. They were willing to suffer and die for the cause. Why can't we have that kind of faith?