

The Real Church Crisis

Do you sense a depression in the body of Christ in America, as if something is badly wrong? We're losing influence within our culture as the anti-Christian sentiment grows, yet you'd never know it in most churches—the smoke, lights, loud music and preaching rolls on as if all is well.

The situation is exacerbated by this simple fact: We don't have our act together in the body of Christ. Too often people come to the church, are deeply disappointed and as a result are turned off from the gospel. The church promises solutions but only offers lip service. We've become excellent at giving people a show on Sunday but lousy at showing them how to actually live. In fact, most church members are as bound up as those in the world—they're in financial bondage, struggling with addictions and their families are in disarray.

This includes leaders in the church. I believe, as John Maxwell says, that everything rises and falls based on leadership. So allow me to address the leadership situation within the charismatic community.

Charismatic churches and ministries typically grow when leaders are passionate and have a vision. It doesn't matter if they have seminary degrees; if they can preach the gospel and if people gravitate to them, they suddenly have a growing church! Anointing is more important than academics. That's partly why our churches are growing while other areas of the body aren't.

But there's a dark underbelly to charismatic leadership too. Often the leaders are theologically untrained and veer from biblical doctrine. What else can explain the numerous—and usually public—theological gaffes such as Benny Hinn preaching that God is nine gods or Eddie Long being paraded around his church as a crowned king (amid a sex scandal)?

As troubling as sloppy theology is, I'm equally disturbed by leaders' behind-the-scenes attitudes toward their flocks. The charismatic community obviously isn't the only one with "my way or the highway" leaders. But I've heard far too many pastors joke in private about having a "backdoor revival" before their church could move ahead. Translation: They had to make some people leave.

I recently spoke with two businessmen friends about why it's hard to find a good church. Both are successful financially and are passionate believers. On the surface, they're what every pastor needs. Yet after being active in a local church, they both became disillusioned with what they saw and how they were treated. As they recounted stories of how pastors felt threatened by their powerful personalities and positions, I felt sorry for my friends (for never experiencing the community they sought) and for the insecure leaders they served.

Countless other mature Christians have been so wounded by leadership that they stay home on Sunday and "go to church" by watching Charles Stanley or Jack Hayford. They get a good message, some good music and an opportunity to "tithe" to that ministry. Sometimes this is a transitional period. Too often it's not.

But this isn't Christian community. Aren't we supposed to assemble with other believers? Aren't we supposed to bring a hymn or a Scripture or a prophetic word when we meet? In larger churches this need is met in small groups or in various ministries of the church. There are many examples of healthy churches where this happens. But too often it isn't.

So what's the answer? I believe more church leaders need to be pastored, mentored and disciplined themselves. Like the rest of us, they need accountability and true relationship, which produces a spirit of humility and servanthood rather than an "I'm the bishop, serve me" mentality.

Leaders are held to a higher standard. Paul's letters are full of specific directives for Christian leaders. Jesus said it's better for someone to be cast into the sea with a millstone around their neck than to cause one person to stumble (Mark 9:42). It's time for us to wake up and see what's happening. There is a lost world to be won. There are "sheep" who need to be nurtured, fed and disciplined in the things of God. It's the only way a believer can survive in this increasingly difficult cultural environment!

Until this happens, people—like my businessmen friends—will feel as if they're drifting. They'll never really find their place in the body of Christ. And sooner or later, they will "vote with their feet" by going somewhere else—or worse still, nowhere.

Steve Strang *is the founder and publisher of Charisma. Follow him on Twitter @sstrang or Facebook (stephenestrang).*