

# The Post-Modern Problem

By: Rev. Michael Duncan

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The post-modern church, with high-priced cathedrals and glossy bulletins, might be getting exactly what it's paid for—congregations filled with superficial seekers rather than sacrificial saints. The neo-qualification for Christian discipleship has been morphed into some iconoclastic hedonism that merely attempts to satiate the self-interest of the spectator rather than satisfy the commands of Christ. A true disciple of Jesus, however, will stand firm in the Lord's requirements: self-denial, sacrifice and separation. Jesus made this reality perfectly clear when He declared, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23, NIV).

Examine the purpose of much of modern evangelism and you will discover a drive to make the church popular. Self-promotion is the force that drives much of the "church-growth" movement in this era and self-denial, whether individual or corporate, is long forgotten. This is seen quite readily in a question asked as an introduction to a leading church-growth seminar, "Now that you've attracted first time guests to your church, what are you going to do to keep them coming back?"<sup>1</sup> The answer is found in another seminar of like mentality, "Create an inviting environment for your first-time guests, one that they will want to come back to time and again."<sup>2</sup> The goal is no longer to proclaim self-denial but self-improvement, self-interest and self-importance—to keep them coming back.

Think with me for a moment and try to imagine a popular, seeker-sensitive orator stand and declare with emphatic boldness, "You must deny yourself!" Or, better yet, imagine a church who advertises to the community, "First Church: The Church of Sacrifice and Self-Denial." Who would come? If it's not popular it's not proclaimed and the church sinks further into a selfish, seeker-sensitive mentality that abandons the real needs of people and the absolute requirements of God. Dr. John MacArthur points this out in his book, *Ashamed of the Gospel*.

Worst of all, it seems people's emotional "felt needs" are taken more seriously than the real but unfelt spiritual deficiencies Scripture addresses. "Felt needs" include issues like loneliness, fear of failure, "codependency," a poor self-image, depression, anger, resentment, and similar inward-focused inadequacies. Some of these are real, and some are fabricated by the psychological sales pitch. These problems, we are told, are behind drug addiction, sex addiction, and several dozen other syndromes. The *real* problem—the root of all such troubles—is human depravity, an issue that is carefully skirted (though seldom overtly denied) in the teaching of the typical user-friendly church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Assimilation Seminar; Searcy, Nelson

<sup>2</sup> Fusion Seminar; Searcy, Nelson

<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, John; *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Crossway Books, 1993), 49

Would this current, modern effort to popularize the church meet with the approval of the Apostles of Jesus Christ? The very first message of the church proclaimed by Peter ended with this statement, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40; NIV). Today, however, the approach is to embrace the corrupt culture, even instill aspects of life into the church that will enhance the church’s cultural relativity. Why? Because it will draw people into the church, though such a church no longer has a message that saves. Buildings are filled and people are empty, though they might feel completely satisfied. For, in actuality, they are satisfied because they have found a group that panders to their love of self.

Where popularity becomes the mode of evangelism in the post-modern church, self-indulgence replaces the command to sacrifice. With the gospel morphed into a call for a better life, it stands to reason that the majority of those saved under that banner will focus all available resources on self. This has become epidemic. John Garner says this: “Pastors and church leaders will do well to recognize that attending church is a leisure choice and respond accordingly. As the church seeks more leisure-oriented ministry efforts, the secular people we live among may well find a place that they feel has value and people to relate to who will share the gospel with them.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, if church leaders want people to attend, do exactly what they will spend their time on.

The problem I see is how quickly churches are abandoning the truth that following Christ requires sacrifice. Few sermons are heard challenging congregants to live a crucified life. Instead, the primary message from post-modern pulpits seems little more than a “how to” seminar on making the most of this world. Without the call to a sacrificial life, the church suffers. The results of this are evident. In 2006, the largest protestant denomination in the U.S. showed an average yearly tithe of its members as just under \$640 per member.<sup>5</sup> That equals out to just over \$50 a month per person. Now, not being a statistician, I can only assume that the average income for the denomination is more than \$500 a month per person. It begs the question: who is the church trying to emulate, Barnabas or Ananias and Sapphira? Can it really be said of God’s people that there are no needy persons among the church?

The church claims to have faith, launching massive building campaigns and extensive programs designed to attract a consumer generation. Yet, James challenges the church to understand real faith:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead. (James 2:14-17; NIV)

The Apostle John expressed the same idea: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18; NIV). No Christian has the right to sit on a throne of luxury when there are members of God’s family starving at the door.

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<sup>4</sup> Garner, John; *The Church and the New Currency—Time* (Leading Adults, Fall 2005), 19

<sup>5</sup> Annual Church Profile of the Southern Baptist Convention (Lifeway Christian Resources, 2006)

No self-denial. No sacrificial living. All this points to one great reality: There is no separation from the world for the post-modern Christian. Just the opposite seems to be true and, more than that, encouraged! How many believers trust the word of Oprah or Dr. Phil, laugh at the jokes of Leno or Letterman and then raise their hands on Sunday in mock worship of the Living God? When Jesus gives the requirement that His disciples follow Him, it is an exclusive arrangement! There is no such thing as following Jesus... plus something else.

I remember speaking with a church member who always wears a suit and tie to church, though on any other day he's found in jeans. I asked him about this and he said, "I wear a suit and tie so that when others see me on Sunday they know that I'm going to church and that I go there with respect." Today, with flip-flops and Bermuda shorts, Christians attend the gathering of God's people with no distinction from the world at all. Now, I'm not advocating a suit and tie for everyone in Christ, but this illustrates the fact that there is little to distinguish a Christian from the rest of the world.

Jesus recognized the reality that His disciples, though in the world were no longer of the world. This is far from the current condition of the post-modern church. Though never voiced, the post-modern church might as well say to the world, "Come to the church because we're just like you!"

Hank Hanegraaff recognized this in his book *Christianity in Crisis*. "Far too many Christians are being transformed by our culture rather than by Christ. Seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness has been perverted into seeking our own kingdom and everything else we can get our hands on."<sup>6</sup> A scripture oft quoted and overtly used to justify seemingly anything the church does to attract a crowd is, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22; NIV). For some this is free access to enter the world of mosh pits and beer gardens, all in the name of reaching our culture! And, if the church doesn't aspire to emulate the world in everything, the easily distracted crowds will find a church gathering that does.

My question is: who is actually being reached? Who is actually being transformed, the church or the world? The Lord rebuked His people, ultimately rejecting them for the very things that the post-modern church is doing today. "They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, 'Do not do as they do,' and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do" (2 Kings 17:15; NIV). John warns, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15; NIV). Paul writes, "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you" (2 Corinthians 6:17; NIV). At the end of all things the call goes out again, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). The call of Christ demands that the church be distinctly different than the world.

Jesus calls to the church of this age, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent" (Revelation 3:19). Who will you be like? Will you look at your riches and turn away sad, not wanting to give up your comfort? Will you be one who builds grand cathedrals, never seeing Lazarus begging for a morsel? Will you applaud those who slander the name of Christ in their unrepentant attitudes? Or will you

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<sup>6</sup> Hanegraaff, Hank *Christianity in Crisis* (Harvest House Publishers, 1993) 186

give everything to follow Jesus, leaving your nets behind and walking away from all worldliness to follow the only Savior?

What if...? What if churches took the monies spent on crystal chandeliers and luxury cruises and provided food and shelter for orphans and widows? What if denominations spent millions on their members' medical needs rather than on glossy, embossed, overpriced advertisements? Imagine the potential the church would have if and when she returns to the Biblical requirement of discipleship. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). The "greater things" are simply waiting for the church to deny self, take up her cross and follow Jesus.

I'm no prophet, but I will tell you the handwriting on the wall. If the post-modern church refuses to repent of her worldliness, if she fails to humbly return to her Savior, if the church refuses to live a self-denying, sacrificial life separated from worldliness, then our nation will remain in darkness and the church will remain powerless and devoid of the true light that dispels the darkness. But, as God spoke through Jeremiah, "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them" (Jeremiah 15:19; NIV). It is time that the church stop turning to the world.