

Things have changed. In the world of my childhood (the 1950s), 95% of Americans practiced the religion of their parents, with 75% of them attending services weekly. This year, one adult in six will change religious and/or congregational affiliation, with about 40% claiming to attend worship regularly. A nation largely populated by Protestants, Catholics and Jews in the middle of the last century, features 2000 religions (and counting) in this century.

Slowly, the United States is migrating toward a post-Christian status. Historical monotheism now has a new companion and competitor: personal spirituality. As one observer has noted, we are in revival; it's just not a Christian revival. Actress Alyssa Milano exemplifies this condition when she states, "I believe in everything. I was raised Catholic, but now I'm more Buddhist. But I don't practice anything specifically." While worship attendance is higher in the U.S. than in any other industrialized nation, devotion to personal spiritualities is gradually displacing the Church at the

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center of our culture. Christianity is hardly gone, but it is considered just one option on a menu of spiritual choices. What has happened to us and how should Pentecostals respond?

POST-CHRISTIANITY

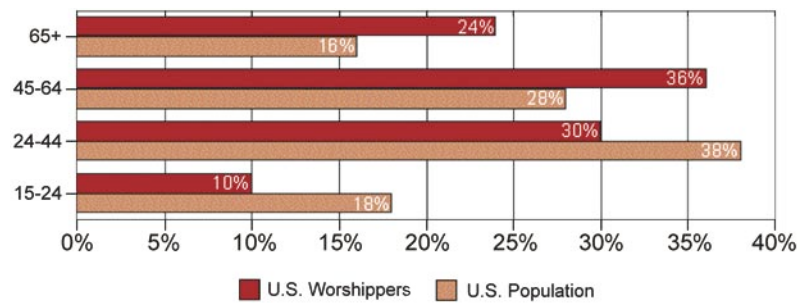
In some respects, the evolution of post-Christianity simply is a matter of mathematics. When the number of people being added to the Church falls below the number departing, the Church will go into decline. Consider these indicators that the American church is struggling to connect with contemporary culture:

- “Baby Busters (born 1965-1983) have proven to be the most gospel-resistant generation the Church has seen in many years.”¹
- “Since 1991, the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million—a 92% increase.”²
- When adults are asked their religious preference in opinion polls, the fastest growing response is “none.”
- The age of American worshippers is much older than that of the general population.³ (Fig. 1)

While there are notable exceptions to these observations, the general drift of our culture is certainly to marginalize the Christian church.

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Fig. 1 - The Age of American Worshippers



However, the method of displacement is not so much persecution as competition in a free religious market. For example, Actress Sarah Michelle Gellar (better known as Buffy the Vampire Slayer) explained her spirituality in a newspaper interview: “I consider myself a spiritual person...I believe in an idea of God, although it’s my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I’ve been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I’ve taken bits from everything and customized it.”⁴ Customized spirituality now is America’s folk religion. Post-Christians are as committed to it as the “very religious” Athenians were to the many idols that populated their city (Acts 17:22, 23). In fact, one American adult in five now reports being “spiritual but not religious.”

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Pentecostals need to ask how we are going to come to terms with an increasingly post-Christian context. Are we able to preach to the “men of Athens” as well as to the city of Jerusalem? The issue for North American Pentecostals is not so much one of survival, but of potential: Will we rise to the challenge of post-

Christian times to become everything we can be? Or, more simply, can a pastor in a blue suit possibly relate to a skater kid with blue hair? Reasons to believe that Pentecostalism has the potential to make a substantial missionary impact on post-Christian cultures include the following:

I. A REVIVAL MOVEMENT FITS AN ERA WHEN REVIVAL IS THE NEED. The number of Jesus’ followers present in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost was about the size of the average Assemblies of God church. They represented the sum total of three years of teaching, miracles and personal discipleship by the Son of God. Then, 3,000 people were brought into the church when Peter’s sermon responded to the question, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12, NIV) These converts represented over a dozen provinces and nations of the Mediterranean world. In a matter of moments, the Holy Spirit transformed a small praying band into a global church. A massive outpouring of the Spirit is precisely what the American church needs today. The longing for revival is a core component (a “chromosome”) of Pentecostalism. In truth, everything else has been tried.

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2. PENTECOSTALS ARE AT THEIR BEST WHEN THINGS ARE AT THEIR WORST. The contemporary Pentecostal movement began in humble locations such as Azusa Street. Only since World War II has the American stream of the movement enjoyed larger churches, padded pews, middle class stature, suburban lifestyles and evangelical respectability. However, these blessings have had an unanticipated consequence: We have worked hard to position ourselves at the center of a society that is now relegating us to the margin.

The choice before us is between life on the margin and life at the edge. We are at our best when forced to depend radically on the power of the Holy Spirit to co-labor with Christ. Our lowly origins tell us that tremendous accomplishments are attainable for those who understand, “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NIV). We must not allow some numerical success during the last few decades to obscure the fact that everything is possible only when *nothing is possible without God.*

Pentecostals need to ask themselves hard questions, such as “Are we doing anything dangerous enough that the Holy Spirit just has to show up?” Such questions are uncomfortable, but they remind us that we are made for the edge, not for the center; the Spirit has come to send us from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NIV). Our challenge is to

be willing to sacrifice respectability, status and control. But it is in exactly these conditions that Pentecostals have turned to God in utter surrender and found that he is still “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph. 3:20, NIV).

3. PENTECOSTALS MAKE BETTER MISSIONARIES THAN MAINTENANCE ENGINEERS.

We have a lot to lose these days. There are programs to plan, technologies to master, savings to accumulate, buildings to construct, PowerPoint® slides to design and meetings to attend. These things are all good but they can tend to become an end in themselves if we are not careful. In my travels across the fellowship, I have found pastors longing to do more for the kingdom of God. They are tired of oiling the gears of church machinery and coaching the saints for a game they never actually play.

Pentecostals simply are not meant to thrive in maintenance mode. Rising to our potential means re-visioning ministry as, first and foremost, a missionary enterprise. This emphasis does not mean that the pastoral needs of the church are to be neglected, but rather that the best way to serve the church is to help its members understand their own lives in missionary terms. A hard question to ask here might be, “What percentage of the people in our largest meeting (e.g., Sunday morning) are here by

Resources for Reaching Post-Christians

Clegg, Tom, and Warren Bird
Lost in America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door (Group 2001)

Creps, Earl
“Emerging Culture/Emerging Church: A Select Resource List” at www.ececbibliography.com

Guder, Darrell L.
The Continuing Conversion of the Church (The Gospel and Our Culture) (Eerdmans 2000)

Hunter, George G., III
The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West ... Again (Abingdon 2000)

Menzies, William W. and Robert P. Menzies
Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience (Zondervan 2000)

Stronstad, Roger
The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology (Sheffield Academic Press 1999)

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Pastor Scoma with his core leadership group.

grown up as a Buddhist, told us her daughter was writing notes like, “Dear God, hope you have a good week.”

She had never seen anyone display a personal relationship with God like that. The girl’s father eventually started attending, and now the entire family—although still on a journey of faith—comes regularly.

Authenticity

Authenticity and respect are huge keys to communicating effectively with our audience. Our demographic is among the most educated in the nation and, like many postmoderns, on the lookout for manipulation and arrogance. While not apologizing for the Bible, my approach to preaching is different from the traditional Pentecostal church. The biggest difference is in the closing. I encourage a decision but do not push for one. I lay out the information clearly and leave the choice up to them. This comes from a respect for people’s God-given intellect and decision-making ability and my deep trust in the Holy Spirit to change hearts. The Spirit of Christ alone turns a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. ■

conversion?” The answer is likely to make us somewhat uncomfortable, but it can catalyze a change in perspective that brings out the best in us—a missionary passion that accepts no substitutes.

4. PENTECOSTALS UNDERSTAND THE SUPERNATURAL AS PRESENT IN THE NATURAL. The sociologists’ prediction that America would become a secular nation during the 20th century has been dashed. Post-Christians lean strongly on the spiritual realm. For example, eight in ten adults report that they would like to experience spiritual growth, and pop singer Jewel says that she is on a “quest for knowledge of things larger than herself.” Indeed, she speaks for a generation.

This kaleidoscopic spirituality involves a level of diversity that can be bewildering to the person raised in church. However, it is in exactly such contexts that the Pentecostal mission has proved to be most effective. The rapid advancement of the gospel in cultures that practice folk religions (e.g., animism, folk Islam) is testimony to the importance of preaching the gospel, “not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4, NIV). Power ministry has

proven essential among populations highly sensitized to the spiritual world.

When the fire consumed the sacrifice on Elijah’s altar on Mount Carmel, the people fell prostrate and proclaimed, “the LORD—He is God!” (1 Kings 18:39, NIV). North America needs to make this same confession, but will do so when they have reason to believe that Christianity represents more than self-help formulas, hollow ritual and judgmental tirades. The power of God must come to heal and deliver.

My field research has turned up many dozens of miracle stories among our younger leaders reaching out to post-Christians. Often signs and wonders have occurred after conventional methods and models have proven futile. Desperation turned to dependence, and dependence turned to power dynamics. No one becomes famous, but the hurting are being healed. God is ready to develop our full potential. The hard question is, are we? The movement’s potential will be realized, not by being less Pentecostal, but by being more so. ■



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¹ Barna Research Online, “Asians and the Affluent Are Increasingly Likely to Be Born Again,” 30 May 2000. Online [Accessed 5-20-03]. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=62&Reference=E&Key=busters

² Barna Research Online, “Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled,” 4 May 2004. Online. www.barna.org

³ 2002 U.S. Congregational Life Survey.

⁴ “Buffy’s Religion,” ChristianityToday.com, Online. www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/008/36.10.html