

Lift Up Your Eyes

by Neil Silverberg

In April of this year, Newsweek Magazine put out a ground-breaking edition entitled, "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." It featured incontrovertible proof that the influence of Christianity in America has been on the steady decline (as if we hadn't noticed). According to the survey, the percentage of self-identified Christians in America has fallen 10% since 1990.

That does not mean, of course, that interest in spirituality has been on the decline. Not at all; while church attendance and religious affiliation has been waning, interest in various spiritualities of all kinds has been on the rise. Oprah Winfrey regularly features New Age gurus and self-appointed spiritualists on her show, all touting the newest spiritual fads.

While interest in formal religions is on the decline and interest in spirituality is growing, so is interest in the person of Jesus Himself. Newsweek and Time regularly feature articles on the person of Jesus; both regarding his birth and his death on Calvary. It seems the public can't get enough of this man Jesus even while they are losing interest in formal religion.

In the face of these statistics, some have been calling for the Church to totally rethink its mission in the world. Some authors are saying that we are witnessing nothing less than the *deconstruction of Churchianity and the emergence of Christianity*. What they mean by this is simple—since the culture is losing interest in “going to Church”, the Church is going to have to “go to them.” And we are going to have to go to them, not with the message that they ought to change their minds and “join our club,” but with a Gospel centered in a person that calls them to enter a kingdom radically different from anything they have known.

I concur with these sentiments. I am convinced that if churches today are willing to radically rethink their mission there is an incredible harvest at hand. I don't mean by “radically rethinking their mission” that they must have evangelistic programs. Rather, it means that they are going to have radically rethink what being the Church means in our culture today. And that means embracing structures which force us to live “outside” the walls where we have been comfortably ensconced.

Let's face it, any church which is serious about this will not find it easy. A story in the Gospel of John illustrates this. In John 4, the disciples are following Jesus and he leads them right into the heart of Samaria. It is no secret that Jews of that day harbored hatred and contempt for the Samaritans. Nevertheless, Jesus goes there with the express purpose of seeking and saving the lost people of Samaria. It is at that time that he has his encounter with the woman at the well.

What is amazing about this entire story though is that Jesus had more difficulty with the disciples than he did with the Samaritans. The disciples apparently didn't see the woman at the well (or chose to ignore her). Simply stated, **they couldn't see the**

harvest! And the reason they couldn't see it was quite disconcerting—*they had grown up in Church!* They had been trained as Jews to be concerned with internal issues; keeping the law, being holy, being good Jews. As long as they were doing that, everything was okay.

What Jesus did in his instruction to the disciples after they returned and found Him talking to the woman was to train them that they must now *see* things from God's perspective. He literally had to train them actually *see* people. And He gave them this simple word: *lift up your eyes and see that the fields are already white for harvest.*

Because of my understanding of the Gospel, I now realize that everything in my life must be related to the harvest. Do I want a great marriage? Yes; but why do I want a great marriage? So I am blessed? No; because having a great marriage in this day and age is free kingdom advertisement, especially since over half the marriages on our block are falling apart (according to most statistics). I also want to be a great parent not just so I will have great kids that will bless me, but because having good kids in today's culture is free kingdom advertisement.

I have come to realize that three things are desperately needed in this hour:

(1) *We need a recovery of the Gospel of grace*

We desperately need to recover the grace of the Gospel. Unless we know that we live by the sheer grace of God alone we will only go to people in self-righteousness asking them to join the club. Before we attempt to “get the Gospel out” we better make sure that we are “getting it right.”

(2) *We need the Gospel to give us compassion for people*

Jesus was moved by divine compassion. Only the Gospel so changes the human heart that we can begin to move beyond our selfishness to really care for others,

(3) *We need to reexamine our church structures and ask tough questions about whether or not those structures allow us to touch the world*

We need to start thinking in terms of going out to people rather than trying to get them to come in. Sunday school classes should be moved to local restaurants rather than remain in church buildings. We need to see the emergence of believers who judge their Christian life not in terms of how well they are doing “in the church” but by how much of an effect they are having “in the world.”

In a word, there is an incredible harvest at hand in American today if we will only “lift up our eyes”