

## A BUMPER CROP OF WEAK MORAL CHARACTER

fundraising prowess and importance in Americans' lives, has become so ineffective at shaping noble values within its own immediate sphere of influence.

Based on raw numbers and signs of popularity, the Church should be having a profound impact on its people's concerns and priorities. Megachurches, with their upbeat worship services and small groups tailored to personal preferences, have figured out a winning formula for growth. Only 310 megachurches existed in 1990. By 2007, the count had reached 1,250. Megachurches provide a spiritual home for some 4.5 million weekly attendees, including many newcomers to Christianity. Across the board, Americans attend church in greater numbers than their counterparts in other Western nations. Such data depict America as a religious nation where the Church is important to people and presumably influences how they live.

In several cases, the Church is growing on the denominational level, too. Denominations as varied as the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, the conservative Southern Baptist Convention, and the liberal Unitarian Universalist Association (which includes some Christians) all report increases in membership in recent years. These patterns contrast sharply with those of liberal mainline Protestantism, which has been watching membership rolls contract since the 1960s. But growth among a diverse handful of denominations nevertheless underscores the fact that independent, quasi-entrepreneurial congregations aren't the only ones penetrating new markets these days. For organizations with a resonant message, opportunities seem ripe for having a powerful impact.

## THIEVES IN THE TEMPLE

In politics, the Church has seemingly become a formidable force on the right and left alike. Successful campaigns to block gay marriage and to raise the federal minimum wage testify in part to the power of churches in legislative arenas. Troubled observers worry that the Church has built up *too much* influence in American society and even poses a threat to the founders' intentions to keep church and state separate. They fear that religious encroachment in areas from scientific research to public education is instilling faith-based values where they don't belong.

But a closer look reveals just how nominal the Church's influence in the lives of its people has become. When the Church is true to its mission, it elicits the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Yet this widespread support for torture suggests that patience, self-control, and other holy traits are disturbingly rare in the Church of the twenty-first century. A strong correlation has emerged between the consumer-driven religious marketplace and the decay of Christian moral character. This becomes clear when one looks to see whether traditional virtues still mark the lives of those who practice the faith.

For many virtuous traits, self-control serves as a foundation. From it comes much of what everyone hopes to see in a Christian: fortitude to resist temptation, for example, or to love when others succumb to hate. Without it, surmounting the

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challenges of discipleship would be impossible. But in the new religious marketplace, churches are failing to teach Christians to act with self-control in even the most basic areas of life.

An epidemic of overeating among Christians highlights a basic lack of self-control. Obesity has become rampant among American Protestants. Nearly one in five Methodists is obese, according to a 2006 Purdue University study. Among Baptists, it's more than one in four. Meanwhile, fewer than one in 100 American Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists are obese. Even when allowing for geographical considerations, the research found Protestants to be fatter than people of other religious backgrounds.

The clergy have set a bad example—about 75 percent of clerics in America are either overweight or obese. This is not a minor problem, as pastors' poor eating habits are raising churches' costs and detracting from ministry efforts. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the country's third-largest Protestant denomination, has warned that overweight and otherwise unhealthy clergy are threatening the church's future as costs associated with clergy health care encroach on mission-outreach budgets.

The Church needs to acknowledge its failure to help Christians fight food-related temptation. Even though obesity is no more common in the Church than in American society at large, the Church has a duty to help its people rise above their animalistic impulses. In church, Christians should be learning that the root of dignity is the ability to say no to oneself. Instead,

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churches notoriously entice their people to gorge themselves at potluck dinners, where processed foods abound, and to graze on piles of doughnuts after worship on Sundays. Disregarded is the long Christian tradition of fasting as a means of building one's willpower for future challenges. Serving up deliciously fattening food satisfies a clientele that likes fried foods and sweets, but it neglects that clientele's spiritual formation. As a result, Christians learn habits of primal weakness in the very environment that is supposed to strengthen them against their lower natures.

Money mismanagement, another sign of weak or undeveloped self-control, is also rife in Christian households. Even before the financial crisis of 2008, Christians were already swimming in debt and looking to financial rescue services for help. At Christian Credit Counselors, Inc., in Southfield, Michigan, the average customer is an "overextended" thirtysomething woman who owes \$25,000 to \$35,000 on credit cards. Crown Financial Ministries serves more than 2 million U.S. Christians and has been growing its client base by about 25 percent per year during this decade. Dozens of organizations have formed over the past fifteen years to serve Christians who face financial disaster as a result of overspending. Apparently churchgoers aren't learning even enough self-control to keep themselves and their families fiscally secure.

Church members' excessive indebtedness once again indicts the Church's weak influence on character. Truly effective churches would have coached Christ's followers to be content