

Christianity in America: From a Kingdom to a Republic
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Introduction

When I first began writing this book, Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* was the number one movie in America, having made over \$200 million - an unheard of amount for a February release. It was later eclipsed by summer blockbusters *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Spiderman II*. Neither of those blockbusters, though, raised the questions and spiritual consciousness that Gibson's movie has.

I'm willing to bet that this movie will create a new fad for Protestants: crucifixes.

We are a fad-happy people. Everyone is looking for the next "new big thing," and Christians are not exempt. Look at some of the Christian fads of the last five or so years. Mission statements. Businesses had them, so it all of a sudden became important for every church to have its very own mission statement. Spiritual Gifts Inventory. They were all the rage for a while, and they were going to turn the church upside down as members finally got involved. Promise Keepers with its "man" power. *The Prayer of Jabez* with its promises of health and wealth. *The Purpose Driven Church* with its emphasis on "people growth" rather than church growth.

But for all these fads, nothing has changed. The church hasn't changed. People in the pew are fried, burned out from trying to keep up, but they are still longing and frantically searching for the peace that passes understanding. The chicken soup for the fill-in-the-blank soul is leaving people spiritually hungry.

With all this hunger for spirituality and all of the "just add water for instant spirituality" type of products, where is Christ?

Gibson's movie does have that going for it. It forces people, through violence, brutality, and beauty, to turn away from the fads for a moment and look at something that maybe they haven't seen before in their search for spiritual fulfillment. *The Passion of the Christ* forces us to look at the suffering side of Christianity.

America is a land filled with success-driven people where success is defined by individualism, power, wealth, and college degrees. This good life is, in fact, the American Dream. It is individualistic, believing that success is found in pulling

oneself up by the bootstraps, never asking for help, and riding off into the sunset. The Christian American Dream doesn't look much different, if at all, and often the parts of Scripture and of the life of Christ that are emphasized are these powerful parts. Jesus is victorious, the Lord of the universe who crushes Satan beneath his foot in Genesis and leads triumphant believers on horseback into the Battle of Armageddon in Revelation.

While all of this is true, it is not a full picture of Jesus, nor even the picture that many believers around the world are familiar with. Gibson's movie thrusts another vision of Christ in our faces. Jesus makes himself powerless. He suffers. He places himself at the service of a community of believers. When he prays, he prays for forgiveness for his enemies - not to enlarge his territory.

And in praying, he has peace.

The Individualistic American Dream is killing us as Christians. We're too busy to pray more than just bullet prayers.

In the 1980s, I took a class on prayer at St. Thomas Seminary, taught by Henri Nouwen. The class was from one to five in the afternoon. Fr. Nouwen asked me to observe the class and report on what I had seen. Fr. Nouwen didn't lecture but just sat there silently. At one o'clock, we all were sitting there, looking at our watches. At two o'clock, we were restless, creaking the pews, still looking at our watches. How long could the silence go on? It went on until 5 o'clock. I reported that I hadn't seen anything. The only thing I noticed was that at about 3 or 3:30, it became really quiet. There wasn't any more looking at watches or restlessness or creaking pews. Fr. Nouwen said that was what he expected. You see, it takes the average American around two and a half hours to clear his or her mind. If you've never spent two and a half hours of silence with God, you've probably never heard from God.

This raises the question: where do we find God? When we're looking for peace, we're looking for aloneness with God in all the wrong places. All of the fads listed above, from *The Prayer of Jabez* to *The Purpose Driven Church*, all of it and everything we do becomes a mantra for trying to find that place with God. When we study the life of Jesus, however, we see that he went off to be alone with the Father. His times of ministry were bracketed by prayer.

Where is the church in regards to prayer? Well, we Christians talk a good game. We talk about needing to be people of prayer. But for many of us, it remains talk.

My wife, Glenda, and I have been visiting a lot of churches lately, and I'm amazed at how much people in the church and the leaders of the church ask their people to do for the church.

Churches today are involved in "maintenance ministries." It's almost as though churches are saying that God has called you to be his child simply so you can keep the church building going. So, join the choir, teach Sunday school, work in the nursery, be a greeter, tithe. A friend of mine who was visiting a church with us volunteered to help with some carpentry for the church's Passion play that they were going to put on at Easter. They turned him down, because he hadn't been through the new members class. You have to go through initiation before you have anything to give. Going through the new members class would prove that he was committed to *them* and no one else. This is a membership in a country-club type of mentality, and many churches fall into this. Be loyal to your local church.

What I don't hear from many of these churches is, "How do we serve this community?" The church, which is supposed to transform lives, is there now simply to maintain the structure.

Bigger churches draw people in by offering a better product, whether that's youth services or contemporary music or children's Sunday school classes. Some friends of mine are going to become members at this one large church. I don't hear passion from them as to why they're becoming members. What I hear is that the church has good programs for their kids. While that's important, it hits the core of what church has become for many people: "What's in it for me?"

So people coming in are asking, "What can I get out of it?" and the church is responding, "What can we get out of you?" Meanwhile, the needs of the community and the world are not being met. We're not impacting the community, much less the world.

So most people serve out of guilt or out of a need to prove themselves to the pastor or the leadership. The leadership tells the congregation, "We'll feed you by teaching you more and more Scripture." What they really need, however, is rest, peace. The message is, "We'll teach you" rather than "We'll care for you." So people are starving to death for a place where they can sense that they're at peace, where they can be fully aware of the Lord saying to them, "Just rest and know that I love you."

This is endemic in American churches. America is success driven and the church is not exempt. It's not American to rest. We're a pragmatic people, and things need to be done. Our motto in the church could very well be, "Do until you drop." What we don't understand, what we don't have a clue about, is that we're losing a lot of people from church. They're just leaving. We can measure church growth, the people coming in the front door, but what we don't measure is the amount of people streaming out the back door. And why shouldn't they leave? Most people in America have heard the gospel. Most people could tell you in pretty

accurate terms what it means to be a Christian. But for many who aren't in church right now, their attitude rings with a "been there done that" tone. We're not transformational.

Add to that the fact that we're actually hurting people. Several years ago, when I was the director of urban ministries in Chicago, I drove every day - and very often got stopped by a train - by a bar called The Railroad Inn. It reminded me in a lot of ways of a restaurant/lounge I used to run that catered to construction workers. I stopped in The Railroad Inn one afternoon and asked the proprietor if I could come in on a Friday, buy a round of drinks for the house, and interview the people there. Two hundred and eighty-seven dollars later, I had the best research I could have hoped for.

The first question I asked of the thirty men and two women was, "How many of you are married, on your first marriage?" Twenty-seven of them were. "How many of you believe that Jesus lived and died on a cross?" All of them. "How many of you believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead?" The majority of them believed that, and the others said that they had never really thought about it.

Then came the kicker. "How many of you go to church?" Six said they went regularly, but "regularly" translated to about once a month. None of them went every week. Several used to go to church when their children were small. But the reasons they didn't go were illuminating. Almost all had been hurt by the church in one form or another. One person said, "Because you people are the meanest, nastiest people in the world." One gentleman, kind of the godfather of the group, in his late 60s said, "Jerry Falwell and James Dobson are nasty, vicious people." Over twenty people in that room could tell me of someone who had been hurt by the church. They had been told in some way that they weren't good enough for the church. None of them had been cared for during the tough times, only judged that they weren't handling the tough times differently.

Instead of transforming, we're attacking. Instead of presenting the gospel message in a winsome manner, after the manner of our Savior, we're sweeping through the land in an imitation of an Old Testament army, preparing to wipe out every man, woman, child, and beast who doesn't agree with us.

Church is practiced in the exact same way as the American Dream is practiced. We evaluate success by the size of the building, the number of people, the size of the budget, and the financial influence a church has. The gospel, though, has always been about downward mobility in order to impact lives. The power and the passion of Jesus Christ is what he gave up in order to transform lives.

At the bar in Chicago, I suggested that maybe all Christians weren't like the Falwells and Dobsons, that maybe television only portrays or reports on the vitriolic Christians. The gentleman said, "People have the wrong image of Hispanics and African Americans because of how the news portrays them, and so they assume that we're all that way. But the difference is that there's always a Jesse Jackson to say 'we're not all that way.' When we listen to the Falwells and the Dobsons, there are no Christians who stand up and say 'we're not all that way.'"

This book is an effort to say, "We're not all that way." It's written to the church a call to be transformed in order to transform others. "Blessed to be a blessing" is how it's put in the Old Testament. It will look at how the church has been baptized not by the Holy Spirit but by the American Dream. It's time to unwrap the cross from the American flag. It's time to understand that we are called to holiness, that we can have peace, that we have nothing to fear, that we should be living on the edge, that we should be pushing the envelope of what it means to be, not an American Christian, but simply Christian. With that kind of passion and excitement, the Holy Spirit through us will transform lives. People will be dying to get in.