

## **When Christians Get It Wrong: When Bad Things Happen**

**Matthew 5:43-45**

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**Mark S. Bollwinkel**

In their book unchristian (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons reflect on social science research by the Barna Group, a respected evangelical 'think tank'. Today fifty-five million Americans between the ages of 18 and 60 are considered "outsiders" to the Christian faith; for the generation now between the ages of 16-29 years old, 40% no longer see the Christian faith as relevant to their spirituality. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 18) These statistics coincide with the work of other respected research done by the Pew Religion Survey and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago which describe the decline in overall Protestant affiliation in the United States and the increasing numbers of Americans who identify themselves as "spiritual not religious".

Individual congregations, such as LAUMC or certain large so-called 'mega-churches', may be bucking these trends. The statistics suggest that overall Americans haven't lost their interest in spirituality. But they have lost, and are increasingly more inclined to lose, their interest in Christianity in general and the main line Protestant churches in particular.

In a national survey young peoples' most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are described as "anti-homosexual" (91%), "judgmental" (87%) and "hypocritical" (85%). A majority of respondents expressed the following negative perceptions about Christians; "old-fashioned", "too involved with politics", "out of touch with reality", "insensitive to others", "boring", "not accepting of other faiths" and "confusing." Only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe that the labels "respect, love, hope and trust" describe Christianity today. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 27)

"Among young adults who participate regularly in a Christian church, many share some of the same negative perceptions as outsiders. For instance, four out of five young churchgoers say that Christianity is anti-homosexual; half describe it as judgmental, too involved in politics, hypocritical and confusing; one third believe their faith is old-fashioned and out of touch with reality; and one quarter of young Christian believe it is boring and insensitive to others. These are significant proportions of young people in Christian churches who raised objections to the motivation, attitude and image of modern Christianity." (Kinnaman/Lyons pp. 33-34)

Today the majority of young people involved in a church as teenagers will disengage from church life and often from Christianity at some point during early adulthood. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 23)

“One outsider from Mississippi made this blunt observation: ‘Christianity has become bloated with blind followers who would rather repeat slogans than actually feel true compassion and care. Christianity has become marketed and streamlined into a juggernaut of fear mongering that has lost its own heart.’” (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 15)

We who love the church might not want to hear such an evaluation but we have got to consider that we might be doing something wrong. And if we ignore or dismiss such trends our churches will only get smaller and our voice more dim. For committed Christians we have been given the greatest news in the world; the God of all creation loves us and calls us to love each other. Yet the current life and culture of Christians in the United States is turning off millions, especially young people, from even considering such news. And for us church going adults, how many of us admit to being so embarrassed because of the public perceptions of Christianity today that we are reluctant to tell family or friends that we are Christians and regularly go to church?

Three days after the 9-11 terrorists attacks in 2001, TV preachers Rev. Jerry Falwell and Rev. Pat Robertson suggested that God allowed the atrocities as punishment to an increasingly secularized society, blaming “...pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians ...” (CNN.com, 9/14/01) Both would apologize a few days later.

Which always reminds me of Anne Lamont’s great quote:

“You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” (Anne Lamont)

Although the media is quick to broadcast the hypocrisy of a tiny segment of public Christians, whether TV preachers or Roman Catholic pedophiles, while ignoring the great good done by the majority of Christians in the world each and every day, Kinnaman and Lyons’ research suggest that the media plays only a minor role (9%) in forming the public’s perception of Christianity. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 31)

Rather most of the outsiders interviewed for their book had enormous firsthand experience of Christians and the church; most had gone to churches before and nearly 9 out of ten of them personally knew Christians, many of them as friends. Twenty percent of all outsiders of all ages (50 million Americans) admitted they had had negative personal histories with churches or Christians, and of young people aged 16-29, 30% reported having experienced hurtful encounters with Christianity. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 33)

Much more than the media it’s the unchristian behavior of Christians that are turning people off from our faith.

In September 2005, a week after Hurricane Katrina killed over one thousand people and left millions homeless, Rev. Pat Robertson, apocalyptic author Hal Lindsey of the Late Great Planet Earth franchise, and Christian radio commentator Charles Colson all publicly suggested that God caused Hurricane Katrina as a punishment on sinful New

Orleans, as a sign of the end of the world and/or as a warning for America to prepare for more tragedies as punishment from God. (mediamatters.com, 9/13/05)

Over and over again we are perceived as people and institutions that are judgmental first and loving last; people and institutions more than willing to ascribe God's judgment and blame on someone else. In these surveys outsiders often define 'Christian' to mean those who want to convert someone to their way of thinking or in failing to do so to condemn them to hell.

What is so sad about these trends is that you and I know all so well that the most Christian response to Hurricane Katrina hasn't been blame and judgment but the thousands and thousands of Christian volunteers that have, and continue to, assist in the rebuilding along the Gulf Coast spending millions of church dollars and millions of volunteers hours to preach loving grace not with words but with heads, hearts and hands.

Kinnaman and Lyon's research doesn't suggest an 'outsider's' rejection of the teachings of Jesus so much as suspicion of his follower's intentions:

"Christians [today] are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose rather than who we are for."  
(Kinnaman/Lyons p. 26)

In Psalm 145, verse 20 reads "The Lord watches over all who love him but all the wicked he will destroy." While Jesus in Luke 6 verse 35-36 says, "...God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked...be merciful just as your father is merciful..."

In Hebrew scripture we hear "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy" (Lev. 19:18/Psalm 139:19-22) while in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus implores us to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Why?

Because God doesn't just punish the wicked and reward the faithful but rather because God "makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

That is not a call to accept evil or to remain silent in the face of injustice. We are not called to live without moral or ethical boundaries in our commitment to love and mercy. But how we relate to others is always to be defined by humility and grace not judgment and blame.

After being injured on his fifth play and watching from the sidelines as his University of Texas football team lost the national championship to the University of Alabama, star Texas quarterback Colt McCoy said something quite spectacular to the TV interviewers and a national audience. It wasn't his theology; "I always give God the glory. I never question why things happen.... God is in control of my life, and I know that if nothing else I am standing on the rock." (yahoo.sports.com, 01/08/10) I hope this fine young man was not suggesting that God caused 296 lbs. Alabama defensive end Marcell Dareus to end his night!

For me his truest Christian expression came in his sportsmanship as he congratulated the Alabama team on their win...twice...as he praised the back up quarterback for Texas who came in and did the best he could...as he thanked his teammates, coaches and family for their love and support during his college career.

When bad things happen to good people, outsiders aren't watching for the words we use to describe our faith; they are watching the lives we lead, the actions we take, the deeds we perform with grace and love.

As we who love the church and Christian faith watch its institutional decline in the Northern Hemisphere, it's not a time to blame and judge so much as a time to look in the mirror and ask if others can see Christ in our living not just our words.

Amen.