

# **FIRST-PERSON: THE DYING AMERICAN CHURCH**

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By Thom S. Rainer

*Note from Pastor Kevin Lea follows this article.*



NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--I am by nature an optimist. I have seen the hand of God too often in my life to live in a state of despair and defeatism. But the state of evangelism in the American church is such that I do have my moments when I wonder if the church is headed down the path of many European congregations: decline and death.

The facts of a 2004 research project I led are sobering. It takes 86 church members in America one year to reach a person for Christ.

Now, I realize that such statistical studies are imperfect, and I make no claims of omniscience, especially in matters such as the regenerate population. But if the research is even close to accurate, the reality is that the church is not reproducing herself. In just one or two generations, Christianity could be so marginalized that it will be deemed irrelevant by most observers.

Why has the American church become evangelistically anemic? The research points to several possible factors.

First, the church and many of the Christians who serve in the churches have become doctrinally ineffective. Repentance is often avoided as a key truth of the Gospel. Hell is rarely mentioned, despite its abundance of references in Scripture. And regenerate church membership and church discipline are sometimes perceived as relics of an old and irrelevant era. When these and other key issues are avoided or even watered down, the church loses her power, and the Gospel is no longer the Gospel.

Second, church leaders are becoming less evangelistic. A survey of pastors I led in 2005 surprised the research team. Over one-half (53 percent) of pastors have made no evangelistic efforts at all in the past six months. They have not shared the Gospel. They have not attempted to engage a lost and unchurched person at any level. They have become busy doing many things, but they have chosen through their lack of actions to be disobedient to Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:19, and many other clear passages of evangelistic mandates.

Third, Christians in churches often get caught up in the minor issues and fail to become passionate about the major issue of evangelism. I served as pastor of a church that spent two hours in a business meeting debating over a 5 percent differential in the cost of two similar pieces of furniture. I wish I had seen such passion for the lost and the unchurched in our community.

The numerical evidence seems clear. The American church is dying. We are not reproducing Christians. American church growth is typically the transfer of members from one congregation to another, rather than the conversion of the lost. I guess I could blame the churches, her leaders, and stubborn church members. But I must confess that I too often fall short in my own evangelistic zeal. Sometimes I get so busy that I fail to do the main thing.

Perhaps the first step for all of us is the confession of our own sins of disobedience, our own failures to take the evangelistic mandate seriously. Perhaps if we determine that the problem begins with me, then we can be a part of the solution.

Will you join me in a personal evangelistic renewal? The results of our evangelistic efforts are in the hands of a sovereign God. But we can be His instruments for this renewal. Perhaps then the American church will see new life and new hope. Such is my prayer. I hope it is yours.

Rainer is president of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

*Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: I can't agree more with the insights that Mr. Rainer writes about in this article. I would only add one additional thought. If we are in the last days spoken of by Jesus and His apostles, then another reason for seeing so few come to a saving knowledge of Jesus is because the great apostasy is upon us.*

*Paul wrote in 2 Tim 4:3 that in the last days people would turn away from the truth and listen to teachers that would tickle their ears. Paul also wrote in 2 Thessalonians 3 that those living in the last days would turn away from truth and believe a lie.*

*Jesus made the statement, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). He also said the last days would be like the days of Noah (Matthew 24). What were the days of Noah like? Besides the fact that the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Gen 6:5), it is also clear that only eight souls were saved and all the others millions (possibly billions) of people had gone after the*

*pleasures that Satan was offering.*

*Therefore, as the last days approach, we would expect more and more people to reject the gospel and fewer and fewer true believers taking a stand for the truth; which begs the question, "Where do you stand in this battle?"*

*Eph 6:13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;*