

# Why Isn't the American Church Growing?

by Kevin Turner

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*The American Church is not growing due to a lack of true revival, which is characterized by a genuine move of God, rather than just meetings and programs.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 16:24, Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15, Luke 9:23, Acts 1:8, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:17, James 4:8

**Topics:** "Church Growth", "True Revival"

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## Description

Natalia Schedrivaya, Samuel Lee, Sunday Adelaja, Joseph D'Souza, Kong Hee, and Enoch Adeboye all address the issue of stagnation in the American church compared to the rapid growth seen in other parts of the world. They emphasize the need for true revival, which involves desperation for God, humility, rejection of materialism, and a focus on soul-winning, power evangelism, discipleship, and missions. They highlight the importance of sacrifice, prayer, holiness, and a disciplined Christian life as essential components for experiencing revival and growth in the church.

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## Transcript

While the church is growing at a record rate in Africa and Asia, churches are stagnating in the United States.

"Revival is not when the top blows off but rather when the bottom falls out." Those words were spoken to me several years ago when I asked the late Leonard Ravenhill to define revival. According to him, most religious activity in the United States does not resemble true revival. We know only a cheap imitation.

We schedule popular speakers and the best musicians and set aside a week for special meetings. We call that revival. Our meetings are set up by organizers, not agonizers.

We have reduced a move of God to a method. Yet the Bible says God is looking for a man.

John Knox, the founder of the Presbyterian Church, prayed continually, "God, give me Scotland or I die!" He said this while he was chained deep inside the hull of a French ship off the coast of his country. He prayed desperately for seven years that God would send revival to his beloved Scotland.

God works only within those who are desperate. Ravenhill also used to say, in reference to revival, that we would either "end up with prison camps or with Pentecost in the prison camps." The apostle Paul either had riots or revival, and at times both. Yet the American gospel does not seem to produce either.

A Chinese Christian recently visited the United States and toured churches here. At the end of the trip he was asked what he thought about American spirituality. He answered, "I am amazed at how much the church in America can accomplish without the Holy Spirit."

We have large buildings and many programs but still no move of God. We have more trained ministers and more Bible colleges than any other nation but no revival. We have seminars on revivals and huge campaigns to promote our meetings. But where is the revival?

We have spotless theology but no doxology. We have no song in our hearts. We have replaced true experience with hyperactivity. Our theologians sit in swivel chairs in ivory towers and hand out edicts to those down below.

As a church we are power-hungry and covet top positions as if we are climbing a corporate ladder. We place value on large churches with even larger programs and budgets. Those who are invited into leadership positions are the rich and the influential. We forget that spiritual authority is not given to the savvy businessman or the sports hero but to those who have carried the burden of the Lord.

Where are the brokenhearted believers who weep through the night over our spiritual bankruptcy?

A true move of God makes you utterly dependent upon Him. The touch of the Father was never designed to touch you just once. It was designed to leave you feeling helpless unless you receive the daily infilling of the Holy Spirit.

A true revival brings us to the end of ourselves. It takes us to the foot of the cross where we lay down our hopes, dreams and ambitions. History is replete with those who have given their all to see God move.

#### Lost Missionary Zeal

Missionaries John Paton and Adoniram Judson both served the Lord in hostile areas, and they both buried their wives and children on the mission field. Through brokenness and humility they saw the Lord touch those who had never heard the message of redemption. When Paton first entered his field of work the locals were filled with demons. When he left, all on the island had become Christians and had renounced the practice of headhunting.

Where is the God of Elijah today? And where is this missionary passion and sacrifice? Our doctrine has changed. Today the church teaches that we are too important to the kingdom of God to lay our lives down. It claims that a good ministry must last a long time.

Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus subscribed to this egocentric American gospel. Both John and Jesus gave their lives as martyrs. Yet we have removed martyrdom from our vocabulary.

People often warn me not to take the ministry too seriously. Perhaps because I spend a lot of time preaching in war-torn nations and dangerous areas where Christians are persecuted, some believers tell me to stop being so radical. Perhaps when we express passion and fervor for the gospel, complacency is exposed.

John the Baptist said that Jesus must increase while he must decrease (see John 3:30). Yet today ministers are promoted to places of power and prominence that were unheard of in years past. Pastors have become celebrities. The halls of their palatial offices are filled with pictures of themselves.

It would seem that these ministers are increasing while Jesus is decreasing! Instead of begging God for a move of His precious Holy Spirit, we waste countless hours begging the flock to give money so the work of God will continue. What we need to do is prostrate ourselves and beg God to strip us of the power-hungry spiritual veneer that has encrusted our souls.

God is moving in powerful ways in the developing world. How is it that God can visit a mud hut in the middle of Africa yet bypass the comfortable sanctuaries we created for Him in our country?

Ravenhill answered it this way: "God does not answer prayer; He answers desperate prayer." Jesus comes to those who are desperate for Him.

The reason I believe that most of us never experience a move of God is simply that we are content to live without it. In the West we now have the money but no longer the power to speak to a paralyzed world. The song in our hearts is gone, as well as our desire for Him to rule at the center of our hearts.

We quickly point to our blessings (which are almost always of the material variety) and claim that our overabundance is due to God's favor. But isn't the ultimate sign of God's favor converted souls and a sovereign move of God?

A Chinese Christian who spent more than 26 years in a tiny prison cell was asked upon his release how he handled confinement. His answer rocked me to the core. He said it was like a honeymoon with Jesus.

Why are other nations experiencing revival and we aren't? Could it be that calamity clarifies while comfort confuses? Calamity is an excellent teacher. It shows us in an instant what is truly important.

When we become desperate, the mortgage is no longer important, nor the lawn care. When calamity strikes, it is people that are important to us, not things. While persecution purifies, prosperity often pollutes. Our materialism leaves us content without God.

### The Cry of the Persecuted

I was working with persecuted Christians in Eritrea when our director there was arrested in front of our house. He was snatched and taken in the back of a truck to be interrogated because of his Christian activities. Currently more than 400 believers in Eritrea are being detained in shipping containers and holes in the ground for telling others about Jesus.

After hearing of our director's capture we gathered our team and began praying. As in the book of Acts, a miracle happened, and he was released within a few hours. But not all believers are spared like this.

While traveling through Eritrea we met a believer who had been held captive in a hole in the ground for four months. His only crime was telling others about Jesus. As he shared his testimony he washed my feet and sang a hymn in his local tongue.

The church in Eritrea has exploded in growth while its leaders have been in prison. Laypeople have taken up the call to evangelize, and nothing will stop them.

The Puritans had an old proverb that said, "Either the love of Christ will draw you to His breast or the wrath of God will drive you to His breast." What we see clearly is that God is more concerned with our holiness than our happiness. I believe God has withheld a move of His Spirit in the United States because He knows we would prostitute it and use His gifts to our own advantage. God loves us too much to allow us to

be lifted up in pride.

Suffering works out a type of redemption that the West doesn't understand. To say the name of Christ in an Islamic country, where Christ is not welcome, means identifying with the cross. Jesus warned that people would hate us because we follow Him. America, when will we learn that no cross means no crown?

When I was preaching in Vietnam I asked believers who have suffered for Jesus what prayer requests we could take back to America on their behalf. We asked if they would like us to pray for opened borders so they could evangelize without persecution. Their immediate response was that they would rather have open heavens than open borders.

The refugee camps and the restricted-access countries of the world are experiencing a refreshing move of God. Yet the paradox is that they lack the buildings, money and expertise we possess in the West. Could it be that they have discovered the true treasure of Christ's kingdom?

When I was ministering to persecuted Christians in Sudan, Sudanese helicopter gunships attacked my team and me. Several people were killed as we fled for our lives.

After escaping and hiding in the rocks, I sat with a pastor who had lost everything. His village had been attacked and his church was burned to the ground. All his possessions were lost and he, like me, had nothing but the shirt on his back.

People from his church had been killed and now he was on the run. I asked him if during his suffering he was ever tempted to doubt God's love. His reply hit me like a brick to the side of my head. "I am most aware of God's presence when I am suffering," he told me.

In the West our blessings have left us content without revival. If a man can live without revival, then he will be content without it. But when he is desperate for a touch from heaven, then God will bring brokenness-and he will no longer trust in the arm of the flesh.

More than anything today in America, we need humility. Leaders who are pompous and have an overstated importance need to humble themselves. No longer should our first question be, "How big is your church?" but rather, "What is the spiritual condition of the members?"

Christian superstars who jam the airwaves are not the answer for a move of God. We need those who will walk in humility, cry aloud and rend their hearts so that God will receive the glory He alone is due.

Natalia Schedrivaya

Natalia Schedrivaya is involved in apostolic ministry in the former Soviet Union. She currently is training leaders to plant 300 churches in unreached areas of Siberia:

AMERICANS THINK OF CHURCH GROWTH IN TERMS OF GROWING BIG CHURCHES. But church growth to me involves spreading the gospel to places where no one goes or wants to go. Church growth to me is starting small village churches all throughout Russia until it is completely filled with the knowledge of the Lord. I have committed my life to this.

Of course I am happy to see megachurches as long as they are involved in making disciples. But many megachurches are composed of people who move from one church to another so they can have more programs, better music, softer seats or nicer people!

In most megachurches, 20 percent of the members do all the work while 80 percent are spectators. This is the case in the United States, and it is happening in Russia's big cities. The revival taking place today is in Russian villages. This is where God's heart is.

An army of peasant Christians has been equipped to win souls. These missionaries, evangelists, pastors and apostles are not wealthy, and they are persecuted by communists as well as by Russian Orthodox priests. Yet they are travelling from village to village to share the gospel. To me this is church growth.

Materialism is the No. 1 enemy of Russian churches in the big cities, just as it is in the United States. Today pastors are not praying about how to reach those who have not heard the gospel. They are praying, "God, how can I have a megachurch?"

This is where the church in America has been confused. What are our priorities? To build the biggest and nicest buildings? To have more crowds? More money?

Persecution has played an important role in church growth in Russia. Most of the miracles that took place in our villages happened as a result of God turning severe persecution and resistance into victories.

Economic hardship has also played a role. When things are tough, the church is mobilized and alert. Unfortunately, when freedom reigns Christians slow down and relax.

I am not against prosperity. I am happy to enjoy God's material blessings. Yet I live in a country where you have to trust God for the smallest things: to buy food, get on the bus or find a doctor.

Ultimately, it does not matter whether you are persecuted or not, or whether you have prosperity or lack. All these things are still leaves on the tree and not the root. We still are looking for the formula of success.

Christians today run from church to church for deeper teaching, yet the apostle Paul disciplined himself to keep the message of the gospel simple (see 1 Cor. 2:1-2). If a Christian has a living relationship with Christ, he or she will never have to be told what to do, how to pray, how to sing, where to go, what to read or how to prosper. Practicing the presence of Jesus daily is the key.

### Sunday Adelaja

Sunday Adelaja, a native of Nigeria, started his church in the former Soviet republic of Ukraine in 1994. Today it is the largest church in Europe, with 30,000 members:

There is not a sense of desperation for God in the United States. Fewer people are God-seekers there than in most other foreign countries.

In our church in Ukraine, for example, we have a 24-hour prayer chain and prayer from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. every night. Additionally, we hold a three-day time of fasting and prayer on the last weekend of each month.

Another problem I see in the American church is a lack of fresh revelation from above. Although the American church publishes and distributes more books than the rest of the body of Christ put together, it is alarming to say that the contents are mostly repeated from one author to another. There is no fresh word. We are mostly fed with echoes.

A third problem I see in the American church involves money. We all know that the prosperity message is a blessing to the church. However, the American church is spending most of its money on things that are not God's priorities. If the church doesn't understand the priorities of God before spending its funds, then abuse is inevitable. This abuse is observed when men and women of God eventually fall into the trap of greed.

Another problem in the American church is a doctrinal lie that Satan has planted in the church to take as many people to hell as possible. I'm referring to the doctrine of "once saved, always saved." The teaching that believers can never lose their salvation is the biggest, anti-New Testament doctrine in the world today.

I have met many American Christians who describe themselves as homosexuals, drug addicts and sex addicts, yet they are supposed to be born again Christians. Parents and wives ask me to pray for their children and husbands who are born-again but are not walking with the Lord. In my understanding, these people are backslidden, and if they die practicing these sins they will go straight to hell. There is a lack of holiness in American churches. If we purge sin from our churches, we'll begin to see a freer flow of the power of God.

Finally, it seems that Western culture and public opinion have succeeded in making Christians keep their faith personal. It is much easier to build a big church in the United States than in Europe because people are more open to the concept of God in America than in any European country. If only American believers will take an aggressive approach to evangelism, we'll see more people coming to the Lord in America than in most countries of the world.

American Christians have a great opportunity, but they must seize it. If they don't, Muslims and other non-Christian religions will fill the void.

Joseph D'Souza

Joseph D'Souza is president of the All India Christian Council and associate international executive of OM International, a global missionary agency. He works among the Dalit people, a marginalized group in north India. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Dalits have come to Christ even though other Indians view them as "untouchable:"

**THE AMERICAN CHURCH HAS MADE FOUR CRITICAL ERRORS THAT ACCOUNT FOR ITS LACK OF SUBSTANTIAL GROWTH.**

1. American Christians have put God in a box. For them, the box in which God exists is one that confines Him to comfortable, believable acts of mercy and grace which do not challenge His people to press beyond their own boundaries into genuine faith. Those who maintain this boxed-in view of God have their own grid through which God's supernatural acts of power must pass. Yet God cannot be boxed in. His ways are not our ways.'

2. Faith in the United States has become consumer-oriented. "What is God going to do for me?" is the question. Rarely does one hear, "What can I give?"

Many American Christians think that if the church and its ministries do not cater to their personal needs they are not spiritually satisfied. It is this attitude that blinds the American church from seeing the example of the church in the developing world and its model of servant leadership. Conferences about personal growth and personal spirituality are overbooked. Christian consumers want to get the biggest spiritual

bang for their spiritual buck. Yet conferences addressing topics related to serving others are nearly empty. Where are those people who want to put the needs of others before their own?

3. There is an inadequate understanding of suffering and persecution. Here in India, we record a new case of persecution against Christians at least every 36 hours. India, Sudan, the Middle East and China know great sorrow. However, Christians in these countries also know great joy as they see God moving with supernatural power that triumphs over the worst persecution.

It is only through understanding of persecution and suffering that true partnership can happen between Western and non-Western churches.

4. The American church has ignored the fact that it is no longer the epicenter of global Christianity. The activity of the church has shifted to the Southern Hemisphere. Soon we will see an increase in the number of full-time Christian workers coming from the developing world to do evangelism and church planting in the United States. It is high time the American church, in conjunction with other Western nations, finds a way to work in partnership with those nations so that together, as equals, we all may praise the Lord of the harvest for all He has done.

For more on persecution in India and around the world, visit [www.aiccindia.org](http://www.aiccindia.org).

Samuel Lee

Samuel Lee, an Iranian, converted to Christianity from Islam. His church in Amsterdam is predominantly Nigerian and Ghanaian, and he is training immigrants from Africa, Asia and the Middle East to reach the nations of Western Europe:

WHY ARE AMERICAN CHURCHES NOT GROWING COMPARED WITH CHURCHES IN OTHER COUNTRIES? As I have traveled all over the world I have come to the following conclusions.

1. We must embrace the miraculous. Because America has so many comforts, people don't seem to need miracles. In Africa and other places where there are few hospitals, churches become hospitals for healing.

But the truth is that we need the Holy Spirit like never before. We can have great buildings and wonderful social gatherings and yet miss the Holy Spirit's agenda.

We must be careful, lest we become like the unwise virgins who had their lamps yet forgot to bring oil-and the door was shut for them. A church without the Holy Spirit's power will not attract people to church.

2. We must reject Hollywood tendencies. Some churches in the United States look like they are sponsoring fashion shows or TV programs. This is a bad example to churches in other nations, and I know that some foreign churches are now copying this flashy American style.

In some African countries, some pastors have started imitating this Hollywood style by manipulating people to get money. I was shocked to hear that one pastor in a developing country recently began dealing in stolen luxury cars so he could make lots of money in order to appear "successful." Eventually he was arrested and jailed.

3. We must forsake pride. Outsiders do not read our doctrines or our bulletins; they read our character and integrity. When people see that we live a dual life, why will they bother to come to church?

I wish that my American brothers realized how hurtful it is to the cause of Christ when they focus so much on material things. I am not against wealth or beautiful things, but why does a preacher need a limousine instead of a normal car? Must preachers have a huge entourage in order to enter conferences and churches? God is fed up with all these things!

The church should teach the world how to be rich and yet remain humble. We cannot transform others if we ourselves are not transformed.

Kong Hee

Kong Hee founded City Harvest Church in Singapore in 1989. Today it is one of the largest and most vibrant congregations in Asia, with dynamic outreaches to youth, the elderly, the physically challenged, families and the business community:

**CHRISTANS IN AMERICA NEED THE FOLLOWING TO SEE THE SAME KIND OF GROWTH WE ARE EXPERIENCING IN ASIA.**

1. A commitment to soul-winning. The Asian church is evangelism-minded, while the American church is revival-minded. America has had many revivals and remains obsessed with more revivals. But revival must ultimately lead to soul-winning.

In comparison, the Asian church has not had many glitzy revivals. But what little fire we have experienced has empowered us to share the gospel with the lost and needy. That is true Pentecost: receiving the power to be witnesses.

2. A commitment to power evangelism. The apostle Paul taught that the key to conversion among unbelievers is mighty signs and wonders performed by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is consistent with Paul's assertion that "[his] speech and [his] preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4-5, NKJV).

A lower literacy rate and constant exposure to pagan worship and superstition has required the Asian church to lean on power evangelism instead of intellectual apologetics. When the sick are healed and the demonized are set free, believers are increasingly added to the Lord (see Acts 5:14). In much of Asia, churches grow mightily when the community sees God confirming His Word with undeniable miracles.

3. A commitment to discipleship. The Great Commission is not an exhortation to make converts. We are called to make disciples.

A disciple is a trained worker with a Christ-like attitude. Discipleship requires more than just the conducting of conventions and Sunday services. In Asia, the emphasis on small groups (or cell groups) allows one-on-one mentoring to take place more effectively.

It is a statistical fact that if a born-again believer commits six months to disciple a spiritually younger believer, who in turn spends six months to disciple another person, the whole world of 6 billion people could be reached in 16 years!

4. A devotion to missions. Following Christ is not about just meeting your own needs. It is about changing the world for the kingdom of God. In American Idol-style Christianity, ministry success is often measured by celebrity preachers with big offerings, ivory mansions and private jets. This is a foreign concept to the

Asian church.

In the Far East, being a disciple of Christ means putting all on the altar and becoming a missionary to the unreached. It is that kind of blood-spilling, sweat-and-tears commitment to the cause of Christ that believers rally around. Believers in Asia are often oblivious to their own poverty and lack. Their highest goal in life is to live for Christ as a witness for Him.

Enoch Adeboye

Enoch Adeboye is the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), one of the fastest-growing denominations in the world. Started in Nigeria, today the RCCG has congregations in more than 16 countries:

IF THE AMERICAN CHURCH IS TO EXPERIENCE THE RAPID GROWTH THAT OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD ARE CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING, THEN IT MUST HAVE REVIVAL. But revival is expensive. It is not cheap.

There is a price to pay for revival. It involves a lot of sacrifice. A revival takes us back to the basics of Christian principles that are fast disappearing from the Christian horizon. This includes a disciplined life of sincere holiness and a life devoted to prayer and frequent fasting.

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