

If we hate that kind of interruption so much, consider this one:

“Excuse me, can I talk with you for a moment?”

A bit annoyed at the interruption, I reluctantly responded, “Uh, I’m really in a hurry. What about?”

“Do you know for sure that you are going to be with God in heaven?”

“Huh? I know for sure that I’m gonna be late for the game,” and my friends and I walked on.

My non-Christian friends scoffed and made general, prejudiced disparaging comments about Christians as we walked away. I was embarrassed, not for my beliefs and being a Christian, but because I was now associated with that experience. My friends knew well what I believed because we often spoke of my faith, but whenever we would run across a street evangelist or hear about Christians in militant activities in the news, they seemed to take a step backward. Eventually, they began to consider me an anomaly in the Christian world, and not necessarily a byproduct of my faith.

I felt bad for walking away from that evangelist outside the stadium because I knew his intentions were honorable and we were brothers in the Lord, but I was even more annoyed at the rude and ill-timed encounter. I’ll say it again—I hate interruptions. We get interrupted every day by advertisers, telemarketers, Internet pop-up windows, and countless strangers stealing our precious time, our most valued commodity.

Telemarketers prey on the elderly and uninformed and certainly generate revenue (sometimes through fraud), but I don’t know of anyone who has ever bought anything from an errant call. Consequently, although I hear it occasionally happens, I don’t think it likely that anyone in a westernized country will accept Christ after being randomly stopped on a busy street for a night on the town. I do, however, personally know of hundreds of people that have been loved into salvation.

Not for Naught—But Not Enough

Sometimes God resurrects those random remarks later in life, so I’ll never say they aren’t worthwhile, but they rarely bear fruit short-term. And I wonder if they are the best use of your time in your relationships with non-Christians. The world yells at us in the activity of life, yet God whispers in the quiet moments. God touches

our hearts most often in solitude and quiet conversation, the confusing calm after major interruptions of death, illness, or loss, and the paralyzing fear of life's foxholes. You meet God when you are still and questioning, and he is faithful to bring the answers when you actively look for truth. Elijah discovered God's presence manifested in the soft whisper of his voice, not in the outward displays of his power (1 Kings 19:11-13). In learning to listen for his Spirit, we lose our requirement for signs.

Christ claimed that he was "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). *To want a way, you have to have selected a desired destination. Anyone who is looking for truth has asked a question. All people who found life in Christ once considered their life wanting.* These are all volitional acts of the will, mind, and heart. That's why Christ never chased anyone down to hear the promise of salvation. He knew when to talk and when to walk and instructed his disciples to shake the dust off their sandals and walk on when they came upon a town resistant to the message of God (Luke 10:10-11).

The disciples experienced resistance, but it was not from the people whose hearts were willing to hear; it was from the people who were threatened by their success in reaching the lost. They endured hardship for the sake of those seeking truth and never forced their message on those resistant. If God whispers, Christ reveals himself to those who actively seek truth, and the disciples were instructed to speak with gentle yet respectful confidence, why then do we expect people to respond positively to interruptions and arguments?

Evangelism as most people know it is an unnatural act. Christians knock on strangers' doors, interrupting their time with their family, stop random people in the street, divert vacationers' enjoyment, and flash Bible verses at sporting events. Others stand on street corners spouting the promise of eternal damnation at passersby with a white-knuckled grip on a well-worn Bible, which appears more as a weapon than a beacon of hope.

Good intentions, even with poor delivery, will occasionally bear results if there's persistence. Just like in the corporate world, even bad marketing will gain you a customer once in a while. We should celebrate those victories of God, but that does not mean we shouldn't make the most of our time and never settle for the occasional happening. We should be compelled to do evangelism with excellence.

Living Thriving with the Label

Failure and rejection are demoralizing, but we are told that sharing our faith is our duty. As faithful, grace-filled Christians, we battle in conversation and relationship against the scars and social impressions left by the extremes of the ambivalent and unchanged so-called Christians, as well as those blaspheming the name of God through violence, hate, and greed.

Because of our “Christian” label, our promise of hope and grace, more often than not, falls on deaf ears. Ours is a society resistant to listening and increasingly unwilling to walk through the doors of our churches to seek answers to life and death. The joy of sharing the promise of life with God has been sucked out of the Christian culture, and many of us cringe at the idea of evangelism. And all our wishing that it wasn’t so doesn’t change a thing. We long for an imagined day of true religious freedom and eager hearts in our own country.

In our postmodern, post-Christian society, with its “coincidental” breakdown of the family structure, multiple generations have missed out on the wonder of the power and love of God. We are not a story-telling society anymore, but rather an information-receiving people. Today’s view of the impact of Christ on the Christian is molded not by family stories but by headlines and news stories about those who claim to know God, yet threaten and shame God’s name because of their sin. “For years, Christians have enjoyed a ‘favored nation’ status within our culture. This is largely because, due to our numbers and influence, we have virtually created a cultural soil on which we stand. That soil is changing. Christians are just beginning to wake up to the growing impatience, animosity, and even open hostility our culture now shows to Christians.”²

Time for a Change

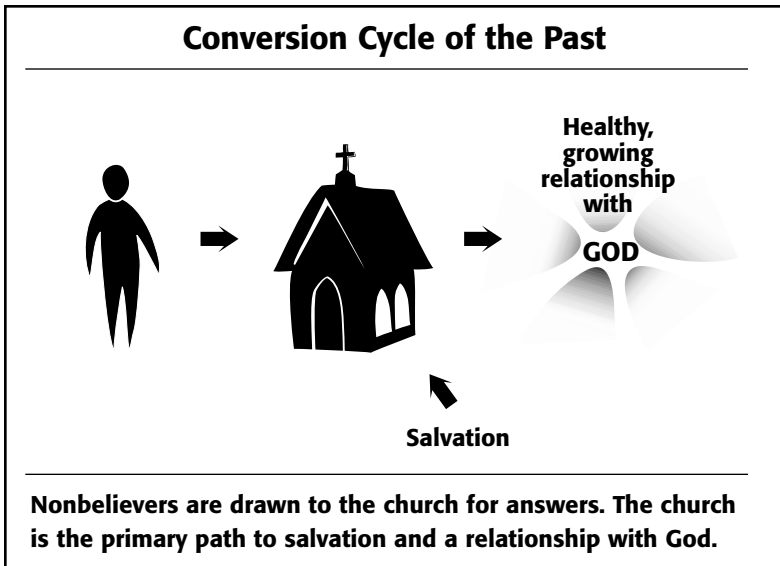
The cultural gap that generates a twisted view of God and waters down the impact of Christ on a person’s life demands we carry the stories of God and the promise of hope outside the confines of the organized church. We need to be ready for when we encounter people who seek spirituality but reject organized religion.

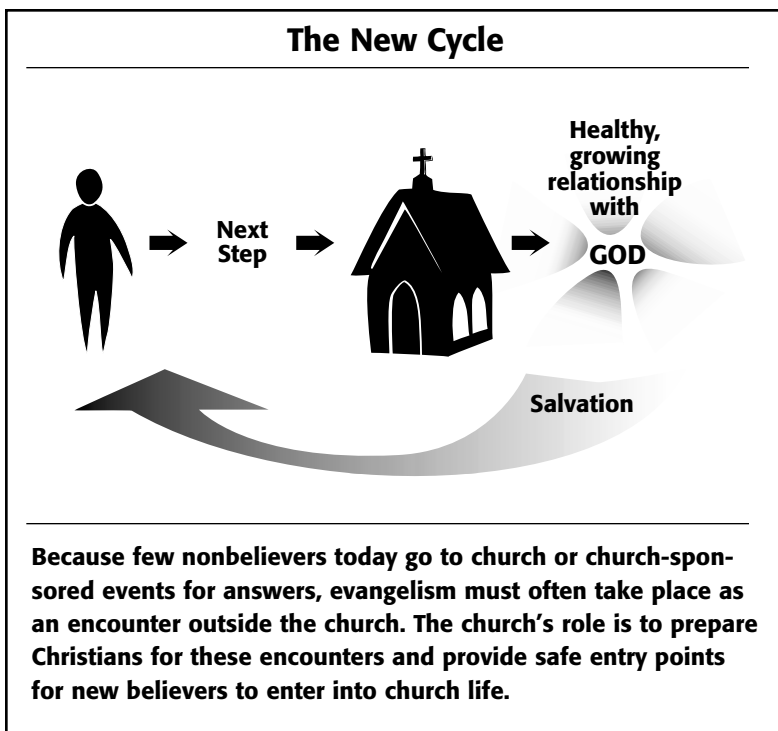
Today, most nonbelievers were not brought up in the culture of the church and do not seek answers there. They don’t share a

common set of beliefs—they don't speak the language. The church wants to give them answers to questions they aren't even asking. Without a new approach, evangelism will continue to be a burden, and churches will remain largely unsuccessful in their efforts to reach the non-Christian. Therefore, the organized church itself cannot successfully be the bearer of the promise of salvation on a grand scale as it once thought.

In the past, church was part of our national identity as a Christian country, and people saw the church as a place to have spiritual needs met and where rules for moral conduct were established. Most nonbelievers shared in a common belief base—yes, there is a God; yes, the Bible is true; and, of course I want to go to heaven when I die. The church was viewed as the “answer place” and the church was the primary instrument of evangelism.

For massive change to occur, the church must shift its focus from igniting revival in the millions of people dead to hope in Christ, to empowering every Christian to be a monument to God's grace on the paths the common man travels. This culture's seeker must see the results of the power of God in the life of an individual and ask to know the story of a Christian equipped and willing to share.





Need for a Change

After becoming a Christian, I saw a life with Christ as the most amazing experience that could happen to a person. Why didn't everyone else see it so clearly? Why had I rejected it for so long? My church, although I thought it was great, had growth difficulties outside of luring Christians from other churches, and I soon found that experience to be commonplace. After inviting my friends to church and finding few takers, it became obvious to me that there was something awry with how the church was perceived, and I wondered if evangelism on a grand scale could ever happen within those confines.

How do you measure the success of a church? It's not as simple as the weekly seat count. Some churches play a healing role, cycling people in and out. They serve a great purpose, but don't reach many non-Christians and rarely show sizable growth because they tend to plateau due to the rotation. Others show regular and even

extreme growth but are only luring disgruntled or bored Christians from other churches with elaborate productions and programs. Still others are growing the old-fashioned way—people changed by grace, inviting others into the process.

How is the growth in your church? Are real, unchurched, non-Christians attending, or are your outreach efforts just pulling in the marginal Christian? Why do people go to church, anyway? Why do they not? How does your faith experience resemble the rest of America? Knowing how your experience compares is not just a job for your pastors and leaders; it is critical to understanding the unchurched and the roadblocks you may encounter in connecting with them outside of church.

There was a momentary increase in church attendance across the United States in the late 1980s when the Baby Boomers with childhood church history returned once married and began reproducing. After that, church attendance dropped almost 20 percent between 1991 and 2000.³ If you think that's disturbing, check out these numbers:

- Median church size adult attendance (100 people) dropped 10 percent from 1997 to 1999.⁴
- People in their thirties are now 35 percent less likely to attend church as the generation in their forties.⁵
- Out of those claiming to be Christian, teens are half as likely as adults to claim to be “absolutely committed to the Christian faith.”⁶
- 62 percent of people that have not attended church in over six months claim to be Christian⁷
- “seven out of ten adults have no clue what “John 3:16” means.”⁸
- Probability of accepting Christ between the ages of:
 - › 5 and 13 is 32 percent.
 - › 14 and 18 is 4 percent
 - › and over 18 years of age is just 6 percent⁹

The situation appears bleak. Church attendance is trending down, but these statistics are merely early indicators that may worsen through time. Single people are 37 percent less likely to attend church than those married¹⁰, and the desire to stay single or

marry later in life is increasing. In addition, since overwhelmingly more Christian conversions happen as children, and adults who attended church regularly as a child are three times more likely to attend as adults, the decline in childhood church attendance will incur heavy casualties ten to twenty years from now.

As children become adults and begin seeking spiritual truth, it is increasingly unlikely they will consider the Christian church as a viable option. All indicators show that barring radical transformation in the perceptions of the populous regarding Christianity, the Christian church in westernized countries is in for a long, cold winter. How did it get this bad, and who's responsible?

Why the Change?

I believe that Christ being less attractive than the world is a byproduct of a diluted view of Christianity. People who claim to be Christian but have never committed their life to Christ and received the Holy Spirit, make up a significant portion of the “so-called” Christian community. This has led to a view that Christians are minimally, if at all, positively changed by God. The resulting impact, when grace in the Christian is not evident, is to not seek change and grace through Christ.

There are certainly people that refuse love and will not respond to honest compassion and caring at some point in their lives, but the bulk of humanity craves purpose and love right now. They just don't believe it is available within the Christian church, and no wonder. When has a zealous “so-called” Christian ever accepted them, respected them, or loved them?

Most adult nonbelievers, I am sad to say, will not toil long in completing that list. But when asked about their experiences of judgment, hate, simple alienation, criticism, and shame at the hands of people claiming to be Christians, you better clear your calendar. I doubt any of you are responsible for these negative perceptions because you obviously have a heart to reach the lost or you wouldn't be reading this book, but these perceptions are reality and we must consider them. Do not be alarmed, I am not stepping upon the soapbox of justice to reprimand the church for these atrocities, but I will shine the light on them because they are the canvas with which those of us who desire to reach the lost must paint.

After the horrific destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, the media has been keenly interested in the role of religion in helping American's cope with these confusing, saddening times. One such research project garnered the cover of *U.S. News and World Report* in May of 2002. The results may surprise you.

According to this poll, 84.2 percent of Americans claim to be Christians. That's 159 million people! "That's great," you say; "We should focus our evangelism outside the United States."

Unfortunately, it is not that clear cut. *U.S. News and World Report* revealed the sobering truth in its 2002 poll where it stated that only 19 percent of people claiming to be Christians believe the religion they practice is the only *true* religion.¹¹ If you are aware of the claims of Christ, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), and believe the Bible to be true, then you should find that disturbing. It would be less troubling if the people who are claiming to be Christian also claim to believe what you believe. The problem is that most do not.

The majority of people who claim to be Christian don't accept the biblical definition of Christianity. Therefore, you can't expect that they are Christians. "Duh," you say. "There's no revelation in that statement." Well, there may not be, but when we look at the ramifications of this cultural sea change and how it impacts the future of evangelism and Christianity in America, it becomes much more interesting.

Many a famous quote exists concerning statistics, most unfit to print. Wilhelm Stekel said, "Statistics is the art of lying by the means of numbers." Even so, as a marketing executive, I saw data and statistics as oxygen—no data, no survival. Incorrect data that is consistently incorrect proves valuable; the key is to know what is wrong and to follow the changes and patterns, not the absolutes. The statistics I quoted earlier are very misleading, but reveal the heart of the problem concerning Christian evangelism in westernized countries, especially America.

To understand how to interpret those statistics so we can get a more accurate view of Christianity and non-Christians, we must understand what qualifies as modern *statistical Christianity*:

Groups which self-identify as part of Christianity include (but are not limited to): African Independent Churches (AICs), the Aglipayan Church, Amish, Anglicans, Armenian Apostolic, Assemblies of God; Baptists, Calvary Chapel, Catholics, Christadelphians, Christian Science, the Community of Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Coptic Christians, Eastern Orthodox churches, Ethiopian Orthodox, Evangelicals, Iglesia ni Cristo, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Local Church, Lutherans, Methodists, Nestorians, the New Apostolic Church, Pentecostals, Plymouth Brethren, Presbyterians, the Salvation Army, Seventh-Day Adventists, Shakers, Stone-Campbell churches (Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, the "Christian Church and Churches of Christ," the International Church of Christ), Uniate churches, United Church of Christ/Congregationalists, the Unity Church, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Vineyard churches, and others. These groups exhibit varying degrees of similarity, cooperation, and communion with other groups. None are known to consider all other Christian sub-groups to be equally valid. David Barrett, an Evangelical Christian who is the compiler of religion statistics for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, includes all of the groups listed above in the worldwide statistics for Christianity (source: www.adherents.com).¹²

The basics of Christianity (Jesus Christ is the Son of God; the New Testament account of his life as true; salvation is by grace alone and not works of any kind, etc.) are the foundation of the church and transcend all truly Christian denominations regardless of their personal traditions and political views. Although a clear dividing line for believers, these delineations are mere subtleties to mainstream culture and written off as infighting and petty arguments. Considering that just about any religion that claims some acceptance of the New Testament and Jesus Christ as a miracle-worker is considered part of the greater Christian church, thus being included in modern statistical research, we must draw the conclusion that these statistics are woefully skewed.

Unfortunately, in this case, it likely makes for increasingly negative results. That 19 percent of "Christians" claiming their religion is the only "true" religion is certainly made up of many groups most Christians would not include as peers in belief. Dare I say

that Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are more prone, as a collective, to make this statement than most of the Evangelical Christian church? Together, they number in the millions, and along with other sects and the ever-present ambivalent, Sunday-only Christian, will forever skew the viewpoint of Christianity in America, thus impacting your ability to accurately represent Christ.

I have taught at numerous churches that have fantastic international missions programs that show great results abroad but little evangelism training or enthusiasm to reach their own neighbors and friends. American churches' outreach programs have traditionally been focused on reaching the lost outside our country's borders and healing the Christians within. But that type of evangelism strategy leaves out the bulk of our society today.

Of course, progress in other countries is easier to see even when success has come as the result of plans and commitments years in the making. This is true mainly because the stark contrast of a face that has passed from dark to light is so profoundly different. I remember standing in a Russian train terminal with hundreds of people waiting for two friends of a missionary I was visiting, wondering how I would recognize them. They were Russian, but Christian, and when they arrived in the terminal I easily pointed them out. Their clothes were the same as the myriad strangers about them, but their faces were different. They glowed in comparison. It was a sight I will never forget.

Being light in darkness is considerably easier to understand when everyone else isn't impersonating light. It is different in our world where the needs of people are generally met, and everyone pretends to be happy and "together." It is difficult to identify the "true" Christian in the workplace or neighborhood, so most people rely on the Christian caricatures presented by the media. To have an impact, or even an introduction, we must be the antithesis of the media representation. Making others question their point of view about Christians is often a necessary step to questioning whether truth can be found in Christ.

Christ voraciously attacked the Pharisees in public primarily because he wanted his followers to understand he was not challenging them to become like their hypocritical leaders. He was promising they could become something better. What would Christ

say today about the purity of our worship and motives? It's worth thinking about.]

What Is Evangelism?

Evangelism has no synonyms, and is by popular definition *militant zeal*. The word and its definition are modern man's creation, not God's, and I believe we have missed the point. God intended our zeal for reaching others to be born of our personal experience with him, filling us with such great peace of the Holy Spirit that we must often respond to questions concerning our evident hope. The evidence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is the proof of our relationship with God. (John 15:26-27; 16:13-16). Biblical evangelism is certainly zeal, but it is born of joy, peace, and God's heart for the lost, not aggression acted out by a misguided sense of duty. To me, evangelism is as much *selfish*, for lack of a better word, as it is responsible.

If you define all healthy relationships as "an ever-increasing knowledge of each other," which includes equal growth in knowledge of yourself, then relationships stagnate and die when one or both of you feel there is nothing else to know, or lose the desire to discover more. God's great design for our ever-growing knowledge of him is dependent upon experiencing his love in the process of someone else's salvation. I'm convinced that our relationship with God can be fulfilling, but never complete, without loving others in this way (Matt. 22:37-40, Phil. 2:1-5).

When God said he gives us the desires of our hearts (Ps. 37:4), he didn't mean that he gives us whatever we ask for. He meant that *his* desires are placed in our hearts by *him*, and then fulfilled. God desires lost people to be in relationship with him, and he desires us to love our neighbors as ourselves. If loving yourself and loving God means growing in knowledge of God, you are called to love your neighbor in the same way. When our relationship is such that our desires align with God's, we must attain his heart for reaching the lost. If we do not have this desire, we are short-changing our experience with God.

All of these points define evangelism as responses to the movement of the Spirit, not coercive actions by man. In their writings, John Edwards, John Piper, and Sam Storms have referred to the

unequaled joy found in passionate service to God as “Christian Hedonism,” and I wouldn’t attempt to rebrand it. This same perspective on looking at fulfilling our perceived duty to God differently applies to evangelism. The enjoyment of God found through the involvement in someone else’s salvation process is as unequaled in joy as the most intense worship or healing you will ever experience.

Doing Our Duty

Most Christians today labor under the burden of what is commonly known as the “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (vv. 19-20a).

Given that charge, I agree that Christians have a “duty” to evangelize, and it appears rather weighty. And it sounds like it is 100 percent up to us to get the job done. Christ left, and now it’s our responsibility, right?

Wrong!

Why do we so often stop there? What’s missing? If we investigate Christ’s entire thought, we get a more accurate and telling direction:

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’” (vv. 18-20).

The missing pieces are the bookends to our assigned task—Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth, and Christ hasn’t left—he is with us always. Yes, he is sending his disciples (us) out into the world to reach unbelievers and be involved in their salvation process. But he also lets us know that he has the authority, we are working on his behalf, and he is always with us. How can he be with us always?

The Bible says we are one with Christ; we have died and have been resurrected with Christ (Rom. 6:4-5); we are equal heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17); and Christ left his Spirit to be with us

always. The difference is that we are still physically here, and he isn't, right? Not exactly. If we are one with Christ, we are one with Christ, period. As believers, we are the physical manifestation of Christ's heart and efforts to reach the lost on earth we provide much more than you may think.

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

First, God woos the lost and calls them to Christ, not bodily, but *Holy Spiritually*. Second, Christ is with us always, manifested as the Spirit in the believer. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that God's Spirit draws them to us! Unbelievers are not led to us for their ultimate salvation because we cannot provide that, but we are expected and designed to be part of the process.

Our Real Calling

We are called to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience” (1 Peter 3:15b-16a).

We are called by God to be responsive, gentle, and respectful, but are taught by our churches to interrupt strangers, argue, debate, and defend our beliefs. Consequently, we find little joy in sharing our hope, and we communicate even less. Because of these methods, our fear of driving our friends and family away causes us to quietly retreat or aggressively attack and hope for the best. Whether it is our fear, our guilt for not doing our duty, or a true lack of compassion for the lost, every day that we do not share in God's greatest passion is a day we have missed an opportunity to know him more intimately.

This day, and for the rest of your life, seek to know God better and identify his touch on everything and every person you encounter. You love yourself by loving God and by helping those you encounter know the same joy. God has chosen to use me in the lives of many people, but it was not always that way. When I first became a Christian, it took me quite a while to figure out why my efforts at evangelism bore so little fruit. Fortunately, God opened my eyes to a better way and nothing in my life, or in the lives of those I have met since, has ever been the same.

1. Telemarketer and Jerry in the *Seinfeld* episode, "The Pitch,"
 Written by: Larry David
 Directed by: Tom Cherones
 Broadcasted: September 16, 1992 for the first time.
 Sony Pictures Entertainment
2. Tim Downs in "Finding Common Ground," p. 25, ©1999, Moody Press.
3. Barna Research, "Church Attendance" research archive: "Attendance rose steadily, reaching a peak of 49% in 1991, before beginning a very slow but steady descent back to 40% in January, 2000."
4. *ibid*, "The 1999 median of 90 adult attenders is down 10% from the 1997 average of 100 attenders, and down 12% from 1992 (102 adult attenders)."
5. *ibid*, "Baby Busters are least likely to attend church in a typical weekend (only 28%) versus Baby Boomers (43%), Builders (50%) and Seniors (52%). (2000)."
6. Barna Research, Press Release, January 10, 2000, "Teenagers Embrace Religion but Are Not Excited About Christianity", "Three key measures of faith further reveal the true nature of the spirituality of teens. Although four out of five say they are Christian, only one out of four (26%) also claims to be "absolutely committed to the Christian faith." That is only about half the percentage found among adults—and a strong indicator of the flagging depth of loyalty Americans have in relation to its dominant faith group."
7. Barna Research, "One Out of Three Adults is Now Unchurched," February 25, 1999.
8. Barna Research Online, "Evangelism," <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp#TOP>.
9. *ibid*, Probability of accepting Christ, segmented by age:
 - Children between the ages of 5 and 13 have a 32% probability of accepting Jesus Christ as their savior.
 - The probability of accepting Christ drops to 4% for those who are between the ages of 14 and 18.
 - Those older than 18 have a 6% probability of accepting Jesus Christ as their savior.
10. Barna Research Press Release March 11, 2002, "A Revealing Look at Three Unique Single Adult Populations"
 "In other words, only one-third of single adults (35%) have become "born again" - that is, they no longer trust in their own good deeds as a means to reconciliation with God, but rely completely upon God's grace for their eternal destiny. Never-been-married adults are the least likely to meet the "born again" criteria. In fact, single adults from all three segments are less likely to be born again than are married people."
11. *U.S. News and World Report*, May 6, 2002, "Faith in America" pgs. 42-43; *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly/U.S. News and World Report* poll of 2002 adults conducted by Milofsky International and Edison Media Research, March 26-April 4, 2002.
12. Groups which self-identify as part of Christianity include ... Copyright www.adherents.com
http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html#Christianity.