

Vlach's "Crisis in America's Churches": What Is the Solution? Know the Problem, Evaluate Your Flock, Teach Doctrine, Expose the Lie; Lack of Knowledge, Hos 4:6

What Is the Solution?

"In many ways, we are living in an age of theological anarchy," says Barna. "The church is rotting from the inside out, crippled by abiblical theology." But what can church leaders do about this crisis?

Experts who have addressed the crisis have suggested five solutions.

First, church leaders need to be aware of the crisis. "Let's acknowledge that we are in a state of spiritual anarchy," says Barna. Only by being alert to the problem can church leaders seriously address the problem. Sadly, Barna has reported a less than positive response by church leaders with whom he has shared his information.

"When I first conveyed this message [about theological syncretism among church members], most church leaders smiled and shook their heads, rejecting the possibility that such silliness would occur on their watch."

Second, pastors and church leaders need to evaluate what their people know and believe. Whether through personal interaction with the flock or through more formal means of evaluation such as doctrinal questionnaires, church leaders need to find out what their people know and believe. A questionnaire about the basics of Bible and theology given to the people would reveal important information. Churches need to ask questions such as, "Do you believe Jesus lived a sinless life?" or "Do you believe Satan is a real person?" It can no longer be assumed that the people in the pews "know the basics." Many do not.

The results of such questionnaires and personal contacts will reveal to church leaders where weaknesses in their congregations exist. These findings may also help identify people who reject or do not comprehend enough essential Christian doctrine in order to be a Christian. Fruitful evangelism, then, may result from such evaluations.

Burge, who himself has created a simple 25-question test, believes such a method will give "unparalleled insight" to church leaders and will be helpful to the people. "It is like taking a treadmill test and then talking about your fitness plan," he says.

Third, church leaders must use powerful ways to instruct their people in the truth. "It may well be, too, that to usher in an era of theological sanity we will have to adopt new approaches to educating people about God's Word and new tools to facilitate growth," says Barna. This includes a well-planned systematic approach to biblical truth.

"Rather than giving people disjointed morsels of spiritual truth each week, we must have a systematic method of enabling people to buy into a biblical worldview that transforms their life."

This systematic approach to teaching truth must start with the pulpit. In his book, *Where Is Theology Going?*, Millard Erickson notes that decreasing literacy among people has probably influenced many preachers in the direction of including less biblical content in their messages. The opposite must become the case. The lack of biblical literacy today makes systematic Bible teaching from the pulpit even more necessary. Perhaps more pastors should emulate the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli \sving'-lĕ\ [1484-1531] who forsook the common preaching methods of his day to systematically teach the Bible verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter, and book-by-book, paying attention to the historical and grammatical contexts of the passages he was expounding.¹

The time has also come for pastors and church leaders to address essential Christian doctrines from the pulpit. If Barna is correct that millions of people in Christian churches, even conservative evangelical churches, do not believe Jesus was sinless, then the time has also come for church leaders to address the doctrine of the person of Christ and other doctrines from the pulpits.

Church members should also be introduced to basic courses in Old Testament Survey, New Testament Survey, Basic Christian Doctrines, and How to Study the Bible. These courses are required at most seminaries and viewed as vital to the ministry of those who attend seminaries. Yet, this basic understanding of Bible, theology, and hermeneutics is often not transmitted to the people in the pews. There is a large gap between the important truths taught in seminaries and what is being taught in our churches. The time has come for these basic truths to be conveyed to all of God's people.

Teaching solid doctrine, though, must not stop at the classroom level. Dr. Brant Pelphrey in his article, "Learning the Language of God: Overcoming Theological Literacy," suggests that teachers must get involved in the lives of the learners.

"Americans will have a better chance of becoming theologically literate when we replace the paradigm of theological study as intellectual exercise, with that of the worshipping community in which students and mentors work together," he says.

Fourth, church leaders, including pastors, must alert their members to the unbiblical worldviews and philosophies that have crept into the church. False teachings have subtly infiltrated our churches, and church leaders must combat these destructive errors and heresies. This will require not only a clear presentation of Christianity but also a specific description of how Christianity differs from the liberal, existential, and postmodern views that are being promoted today.

Finally, we must encourage diligent and gifted teachers in the church. As Burge states, "We need to identify young men and women in the church who have gifts of teaching and intellect and encourage them to pursue their gifts." As we esteem the gift of teaching and those who teach well, we will "help bring about the rebirth of biblical literacy and informed faith in North America."

Long-Term Effort

¹ In 1520 (Zwingli) secured permission to preach the "true divine Scriptures" which led to the Swiss Reformation (1522). In pursuance of his view of the supremacy of Scripture, Zwingli preached his now famous sermons at the Oetenbach convent and ... he secured fresh authorization from his bishop to continue preaching. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 15th ed., 19:1179.)

Experts do not expect the trend toward biblical illiteracy in churches to change. This does not alter, though, the responsibility of church leaders to do all they can to reverse this dangerous trend. The church is called to be the “pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). And those who are its leaders must follow the apostle Paul in proclaiming “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

Turning things around will take “a massive, concerted long-term effort,” says Barna. But we must try. “We must pray for God’s guidance and power to bring about the reformation that He undoubtedly desires for America.”²

What is the underlying problem in this long but instructive article? Lack of knowledge! And what have we noted from Scripture is the result of this deficiency?

Hosea 4:6 - My people [Israel] are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you from being My priest [priest nation]. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children [the next generation].

Jeremiah 17:1 - The sin of Judah is being engraved [כָּתַב *kathav*: Qal passive participle: sin receives the action of being written in stone] with an iron chisel [עֵט ‘et: a stylus] and inscribed [חָרַשׁ *charash*: to engrave metal] with a diamond [שְׁמִיר *shamir*: flint, emery, or adamant stone] tip on the tablets [לוּחַ *luach*: stone tablet] of their hearts and the horns [קֶרֶן *qeren*: brass projections on the corners of altars] of their altars [these actions imply volitional choice].

v. 2 - Their children [בֵּן *ben*: children in general] remember [זָכַר *zachar*: memory pertains to places & objects to which the one remembering clings (Jer 17:2)³] their altars and their sacred poles dedicated to the goddess Asherah [the Baal cult], set up beside the green trees on the high hills.

v. 3 - O My mountain in the field [idiom for Mount Zion or Jerusalem], I will give your wealth and all your treasures away as plunder. I will give it away as the price for the sins you have committed throughout your land.

v. 4 - And you will lose your hold on the land which I gave to you as a permanent possession. I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you know nothing about [Chaldea].

² Michael J. Vlach, “Crisis in America’s Churches: Bible Knowledge at All-Time Low,” *Theological Studies.org*, c. 2004. <http://www.theologicalstudies.citymax.com/page/page/1573625.htm>.

³ Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, “זָכַר *zkr* to remember,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1:383.