

Religion in America in 2004 has gone overboard catering to the physical man while leaving families spiritually starved by a "low calorie" intake of non-offensive religious teaching.

"Religion-Lite"

On June 27, the *Indianapolis Star* reported that **89%** of Hoosiers believe in heaven, while **76%** believe in hell. These figures are somewhat higher than national averages. According to *U.S. News & World Reports* **78%** of Americans believe in heaven while only **60%** believe in hell. Another interesting statistic: only **4% of those who believe in hell think they will go there!** While not that surprising, it is a reminder of how many Americans believe that exhibiting good morals is the only requirement to go to heaven. Could this be why **74%** of Hoosiers believe one can be a good Christian without going to church regularly? While moral living is a good thing, one must not forget that total commitment is required. Without it, a home in heaven will not be possible. Jesus said: *If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.* (Matthew 16:24) This message will not resonate with the majority—who are increasingly embracing a secular society and are quick to cast off a dedicated spiritual life as religious fanaticism. But then again, the message of Christianity has rarely appealed to the majority of people.

In John 6, as Jesus is teaching, He is followed by huge and ever-growing crowds. We are told, *After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick.* (John 6:1-2) In the next few verses five thousand people are fed from five loaves and two fishes. The people recognized that Jesus performed a miracle and said, *this is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.* (John 6:14) Judging by our human standard, one might be impressed by the huge crowds and their "desire" to follow Jesus. They even intended to take Him by force and make him king. Jesus promptly removes Himself from the situation, going to a secluded area where He could be alone. After dark, the disciples board a boat to go to the other side of the sea. Jesus walks on the water to them and on the next morning they land at Capernaum. Waking up, the large crowds realize Jesus is not with them. John 6:24 says they boarded small boats and came *seeking Jesus.*

We might at first react to these events by saying, "Wow! What dedication! They were willing to seek Jesus wherever He went!" But, was their dedication genuine? What were their motives in seeking the Savior? Jesus revealed the answer when He said, *you seek Me, not because you saw*

The majority of Americans are not concerned with spiritual matters. We are a nation at relative peace. Even though we find ourselves engaged in a war against terrorists—it feels far removed since the battle is largely being fought overseas and almost three years have elapsed since the September 11 attacks. We are an affluent country. "Idol worship" is alive and well today. Acquiring "stuff" and finding the money to pay for it have become a religion for some. On top of this, consider how the idea of "tolerance" has effected America's spiritual views. The "I'm OK, You're OK" mentality is here to stay. Instead of being a people governed by **the** standard of right and wrong, we are now a nation governed by its feelings. Commenting on the need to be tolerant of all religions, one Hoosier is quoted in the *Indianapolis Star*, "If people live their faith day-in and day-out, I don't think God is going to turn them away." In this scenario, service to God is determined by the individual. What works for one person, may not work for the other. *Your faith may require dedicated service. Mine may not. It's OK, God will save you in the end.* No wonder it is hard for Americans to get motivated about religious matters!

Equally tragic is the fact that we find some churches coddling skin-deep "dedication" among so-called believers. Central Indiana is full of large churches that are "growing." The emphasis appears to be on packing people in the pew and doing whatever it takes to do it. If getting the most people requires spending millions on family life centers, multipurpose centers, exciting music, and a *feel-good* doctrinal approach then it is done with hardly a question raised. It is as if the "if you build it, they will come" mentality has fully entrenched itself in modern religious thinking. The crowds come, human standards are met, and men pat themselves on the back thinking that God is glorified. The question of what attracted the huge crowds is hardly considered. Are the congregants truly *seeking God?* Or are they attracted to the great daycare center the church has gone in debt to build? How many would be in attendance if the sports programs and drama presentations were eliminated? Religion in America in 2004 has gone overboard catering to the **physical** man while leaving families spiritually starved by a "low calorie" intake of non-offensive religious teaching. The tragedy of "Religion-Lite" has caused many a person to be deceived in thinking that all is well on the spiritual front while never understanding the life-encompassing

signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. (John 6:26) From this point Jesus teaches an important lesson. He provides what is necessary to gain spiritual life—because He is our spiritual food (John 6:35, 48, 51). True disciples are those who seek Him for spiritual gain—not physical! What was the response to His teaching? The majority turned away from Him. Their "dedication" was only skin-deep. John 6:66 says, *as a result of this, many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.* What was true then, is true today.

commitment that Christianity requires.

God's word has a very sobering warning. The majority of persons will not spend eternity in heaven. In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus said, *Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.* In these verses, Jesus teaches us that great effort must be expended in order to go to heaven. Lives must be transformed. Radical change for the better, faith, and perseverance are not optional matters. People must be taught that service to God is more than just "when it's convenient." It is to be a life-altering experience! Religious service without these qualities is a waste of time. Just a few verses later Jesus warns: "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'" "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'*" (Matthew. 7:21-23)

How strong is your spiritual hunger? Jesus said, *do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal* (John 6:27). Don't be lulled to apathy which results from spiritual malnourishment. Give yourself completely to Him so that you will not be caught short on judgment day! *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.* (Matthew 5:6)

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