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The Unchurched Next Door: A New Look at the Challenge

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Rainer is founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Over the past decade, he has emerged as the nation's leading expert in church growth and evangelistic strategies. In a very real sense, Rainer operates in two different worlds, with one foot in academic research and the other firmly planted in the local church.

In *The Unchurched Next Door*, Rainer and his research team consider the real issues involved in reaching unchurched Americans. His findings will surprise many Christians—including many pastors—and offer vital insights as the church looks forward into the twenty-first century.

The Unchurched Next Door represents a massive research project based in a national survey. From the onset, Rainer was determined to force Christians to look at the unchurched all around them. "Most of the unchurched are your neighbors, your coworkers whom you know well, and even your family members," he explains. "That is why we call them 'the unchurched next door.' They have much in common with us. Many of them have your moral values. Most are not antichurch or antireligion. They are very much like you—except that they are lost without Christ."

After interviewing thousands of unchurched Americans, the Rainer research team looked for patterns in the profiles. Based on the results, Rainer suggested five different levels of responsiveness to the gospel. "U1" identifies unchurched Americans who are highly receptive to hearing and believing the good news. They know something about Christianity, and have a positive attitude toward the church. "U2" individuals are receptive to the gospel and willing to hear a message from the church. Those categorized as "U3" are identified as neutral, "with no clear signs of being interested, yet perhaps open to discussion." The "U4" group demonstrates resistance to the gospel but no antagonism. The most unresponsive group in the population is identified as "U5" The most secular Americans are "highly antagonistic and even hostile to the gospel."

Given the contours of post-Christian America, many believers would assume that the U5 category would include a large number of our fellow citizens. That assumption is not sustained by the facts. Rainer's research indicates that the U5 category fits only about five percent of the American population. Most unchurched Americans are grouped in the central three categories. Those already friendly to the church, the U1s, comprise eleven percent of the population, serving as something of a bookend to the U5s.

The majority of the unchurched fit the middle categories, with 27% listed as U2, 36% as U3, and 21% as U4. As Rainer summarizes, "Most of the unchurched are not antichurch or anti-Christian." By and large, they have had little contact with Christianity, and are not highly motivated when it comes to issues of faith and belief.

In reviewing the research, Rainer and his team came to some surprising conclusions. First of all, most Americans have never been invited to church—never. Yet, 82% indicated that they would be at least "somewhat likely" to attend church if invited. As Rainer comments, "Only twenty-one percent of active church goers invite anyone to church in the course of a

year. But only two percent of church members invite an unchurched person to church.” He concludes: “Perhaps the evangelistic apathy so evident in so many of our churches can be explained by a simple laziness on the part of church members in inviting others to church.”

One of the most devastating insights drawn from the research is the fact that most unchurched Americans feel themselves safe from the evangelistic reach of believing Christians. They do not sense that Christians are seeking actively to share the gospel with them, and many nonbelievers are actually wondering what makes Christians so reticent to talk about their faith. Furthermore, most of the unchurched indicate that their Christian friends have little actual influence on their lives.

The withdrawal of men from participation in many churches has led a good many researchers to believe that men are most highly resistant to the gospel. This is also born out by a great deal of experience in local churches. Nevertheless, Rainer’s research indicates that most men are grouped in the middle categories, and show relatively low levels of interest in the gospel—either positive or negative. Indeed, this research indicates that unchurched Americans classified in U5—the most antagonistic category—are more likely to be women. As a matter of fact, women tended to predominate in both U1 and U5, perhaps indicating that women are more likely to place a high value on the issue of faith, and thus tend to be more passionately Christian or secular.

Unsurprisingly, Rainer also discovered that the U5s tend to be more highly educated, more wealthy, and more condescending toward the Bible than other Americans. This group is marked by an anti-supernatural bias combined with a secular lifestyle. One woman interviewed for the project said simply, “I have no need for the Bible. The Bible was written for very simple people. It was written to give moral and ethical guidance to uneducated people”.

The Unchurched Next Door is a serious look at a serious problem. The undeniable fact is that America’s churches are falling behind in the challenge of evangelism. The best data available indicate that the percentage of the population active in Christian churches has failed to grow in even a single metropolitan area in the United States over the last twenty years. More to the point, churches have failed to grow even at a pace that would equal the growth of the population in general. America is being transformed into a secular society at a pace that would shock most Christians—if they ever cared to look.

Thom Rainer is a specialist in church growth, and he clearly wants to help churches to grow—both numerically and spiritually. At the same time, however, he wants to make certain that it is the church that grows, not merely a crowd or voluntary association. He is a powerful advocate for expository preaching and clear Gospel proclamation.

For that reason, he gives serious attention to theological issues at stake. Specifically, Rainer identifies a creeping inclusivism in the pews, combined with a growing disbelief in Hell among the public, as sources of evangelistic malaise.

Inclusivism, the belief that personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not fundamentally necessary for salvation, has been growing among some Christians for decades. Driven first by liberal theologians who intentionally sought to redefine the faith, inclusivism now fits the cultural mood, and allows Christians to claim simultaneously to be believers in Christ and to deny the gospel.

As Rainer claims, “belief in inclusivism goes completely against the teaching of Christ and Scripture. The Bible teaches exclusivism, the belief that explicit faith in Christ is the only way of salvation.” The impact of creeping inclusivism is obvious. “Why should one go to the trouble of sharing Christ when that person can be saved without placing explicit faith in Christ? Why waste your time?”

The denial of Hell is another issue that diminishes concern for evangelism. The denial or redefinition of Hell is now found among many who claim to be Christians, and Hell has disappeared almost entirely from the public consciousness of the nation. Today’s Christians should note that Jesus himself was bold to warn sinners that they should fear Hell and understand its very real and pressing threat. Far too many Christians see Hell as an embarrassment rather than as a motivation for sharing the gospel.

Most helpfully, Rainer points to an array of evangelistic touch points that Christians should seize for the cause of the gospel. After all, most of these unchurched Americans are living all around us. Their children play with our children on the playground; Christians and non-Christians work together in the business world; and we all live in neighborhoods filled with persons who desperately need to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A simple conversation with our neighbors will help to reveal their own disposition toward the church and the Gospel. Nevertheless, we should not assume that one who fits the U5 category is further from the reach of the gospel than those who seem to fit U1. The fact is that every single unbeliever is united in an absolute and unconditional need for the gospel. Furthermore, there is a basic antagonism between belief and unbelief.

We cannot predict who will respond to the Gospel. Often, those who appear most likely to respond never do so. At the same time, many of those who are most antagonistic to the church and to the gospel, do come to Christ. This is an important reminder to us that every single conversion is a miracle of God.

The Unchurched Next Door will prompt much thought and should move every thoughtful Christian toward greater faithfulness in evangelism. This book will also help us to understand our unchurched neighbors. Who are they? “They are the unchurched next door. They are your friends, your neighbors, your classmates, your coworkers, your merchants, your acquaintances, and your family members. They need Christ. And they are waiting to hear from you.” What are we waiting for?

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