

## How Important Is Your Church?

by

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Okay, Christians, I've got two questions:

First, how important to you is your relationship with Jesus Christ? On a scale from one to ten, with one being "not important at all," and ten being "the most important thing in my life."

Second, how important to you is your church? Same scale.

Ask those questions to Christians and you would expect that as the number goes up in the answer to questions one it would go up on question two.

The more important Jesus Christ is in our lives, the more important our church would be, right?

Well, maybe not.

In fact, some recent research shows that for many Christians it's just the opposite. The closer they get to Jesus, the further they get from their church.

The Willow Creek Association commissioned a three year study of 11,120 Christians from seven protestant denominations to see how people grow in their faith. The results of that study have been published in the book, *Reveal: Where Are You?* They are, well, shocking to those of us whose job it is to lead churches.

Sometime in the past thirty years the relationship Christians have with their churches has undergone a huge change.

Thirty years ago Christians believed that their church was a community of faith. It was where faithful people came together to encourage each other and hold each other accountable to their baptism and membership vows. It was where people who were mature in the faith befriended and taught those who were young and/or new.

It was where people of faith pooled their resources of money, time, and talent to help the poor, the sick, the lonely and the oppressed. And it was where we made friends and ate and sang and laughed together and learned to love people that we might not have even liked in another setting.

But, today that's all changing.

For many Christians, the church is regarded like a spiritual fast food restaurant. It's where they come when they need some spiritual nourishment but they don't feel any commitment to it. The church is one of many shops in the spiritual marketplace but it isn't required. It's an accessory, not a necessity.

Most Christians feel that they are as likely to get close to Christ at home watching television, visiting with their friends, eating with their family, reading a self-help book or walking in the woods as they are at church.

And the ones most likely to feel this way are the ones who identify themselves as living a "Christ centered life."

The Willow Creek study showed that people tend to experience spiritual growth through four stages. In each of the first three stages they become increasingly committed to their church. But in the fourth, final and most mature stage they become dissatisfied with their churches.

They report that they want more – “more in-depth teaching, more connection opportunities, more serving options and more of about everything else...” In other words, they want their spiritual fast food restaurant to provide a bigger menu.

Somewhere along the line, as they were maturing in their faith, someone forgot to tell them that while half of the gospel message is about joy and freedom, the other half is about duty and responsibility.

A whole bunch of Christians have a mature theology and an infantile ecclesiology.

They grew up but they never climbed down from the highchair.

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