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When Perception is no Longer Reality: Leading Beyond the Limitations of Yesterday's Certainties

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PETER BURCH AND ERICH BAUMGARTNER WHEN PERCEPTION IS NO LONGER REALITY: LEADING BEYOND THE LIMITATIONS OF YESTERDAY'S CERTAINTIES

Abstract: Much is known about why people in North America do not attend church. Peter Burch, a Baptist minister, decided to find out how these reasons apply to the Pacifica community of California, a suburb of San Francisco; but he took his research one step further. He also wanted to know how church members perceived the reasons for non-attendance in their community. In the process, he was in for a surprise that led him to discover the fundamental attribution error in action. When he grouped the reasons given by non-attenders and compared them with perceptions of church members, he discovered that they were often on opposite sides of the spectrum. This article explores the implications of these findings for church leaders who are discovering that today's missional context needs to lead beyond the conventional wisdom of past solutions.

Keywords: *church non-attendance; perception; attribution theory; adaptive leadership*

Introduction

My (Peter's) wife Holly and I arrived at Vista Del Mar Baptist Church (VDMBC) in Pacifica, California, a suburb of San Francisco, just three weeks shy of Easter, 2000. VDMBC was founded in the 1950s in the garage of a tract home. After two decades of consistent growth, the congregation moved into an attractive 200-seat sanctuary in 1976. Regrettably, the next two decades brought consistent decline, and, at the time I arrived as the new pastor, the church had returned to a garage-sized congregation. Having no staff to direct or secretary with whom to talk, I set up "office" in the marketplace where the people I hoped would one day attend my church already seemed to hang daily: a local coffee shop. With a cup of coffee in hand and my laptop open, I set about my church work. The top priority of

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my to-do list was meeting the future attenders of VDMBC.

And meet people I did: moms and dads, teens and adults, married and divorced, gays and lesbians, Republicans and Democrats, employed and unemployed, African Americans and Filipinos, Asians and Anglos, church attenders and non-attenders. “Who are you? Are you married? What do you do for a living? How many kids do you have?” These were the types of questions I asked. Eventually, I would get around to asking, “Do you go to church?” Most either did not attend or had not attended for quite some time. I would then follow up with the question, “Why don't you go to church?” This was what I really wanted to understand, and I heard many reasons. Some had moved and never tried to find another church to attend. Empty nesters admitted that they lost contact with the families they used to be connected within church. Others didn't have much good to say about churches or Christians. The reasons they acknowledged were often not in sync with my preconceived notions concerning the reasons for church non-attendance in Pacifica. In fact, their answers sometimes surprised me.

At the time, I was also enrolled in a PhD in Leadership Program at Andrews University; this program emphasizes the role of leaders as researchers. When the time came for me to select a topic for my doctoral dissertation, I turned this quest for answers into my research topic: “What are the *real* reasons for church non-attendance in Pacifica?” I really wanted to know. As I reviewed previous studies, I realized that many had already investigated the reasons for church nonattendance in America (e.g., Fichter, 1954; Hale, 1977; Hoge, 1981; Princeton, 1978; Princeton, 1988; Hadaway, 1990; Rainer, 2001). Many of these reasons were most likely applicable to the Pacifica community of California. However, I also remembered the misperceptions that had surfaced in my own conversations with non-attenders in the coffee shop. Since most of us know people who rarely attend church, it would be reasonable to assume that churchgoers have formed certain opinions about why people do not go to church. How accurate were these perceptions? This was a new wrinkle on a well-researched problem with potentially far-reaching implications for church leaders. Thus, I decided to search for the answer.

A Decline in Attendance

How do North Americans perceive the relationship between faith, spiritual growth, and church attendance/non-attendance? A 2014 study conducted by the Barna Group asked American respondents to share ways to grow their faith. They gave different responses, including prayer, relationships with family and friends, reading the Bible, and having children. What was a surprise to the researchers was that attending church did not make it into the top ten list! Many Americans apparently no longer viewed church involvement as a corner-

stone of their faith as they had only a few decades before (Barna Group, 2014).

The Barna study revealed that Americans appeared to be divided about the importance of attending church. “While half (49%) say [church attendance] is ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ important, the other 51% say it is ‘not too’ or ‘not at all’ important. The divide between the religiously active and those resistant to churchgoing impacts American culture, morality, and religion.” When the same study asked respondents to share reasons they did not attend church, the top two explanations given by Americans of different denominations and ages were, “I find God elsewhere” (40%) and, “Church is not relevant to me personally” (35%) (Barna Group, 2014).

This trend is especially noticeable among millennials. This was recently pointed out by Brady Sheerer (2017), who notes five reasons millennials are no longer interested in attending church: (1) the church is “fake,” (2) the church is exclusive, (3) the church does not care about the community, (4) the church is aggressive and hypercritical, and (5) the church ignores the big issues.

The Barna Group (2015) reported similar findings; their research discovered that the number one reason millennials give for not attending church was their perception that the church was “fake.” According to their study, 66% of millennials identify American churchgoers to be hypercritical. No wonder Sheerer (2017) asks, “Who would want to go to a place every week where you feel like all the people are two-faced?”

How does church non-attendance of millennials compare with Americans as a whole? According to the Barna Group in 2004, 44% of millennials reported that they had not attended the church in the last six months, while the national average was 34%. In 2007, that number appeared consistent for millennials; 44% of millennials again reported that they had not attended the church in the last six months, while the national average dropped to 31%. In 2010, the number of millennials reporting that they had not attended the church in the last six months shrank to 36%, while 28% of the general public reported the same. However, that trend reversed in 2013, when over half (52%) of millennials reported that they had not attended the church in the last six months, compared to the national average of 47%. What were their reasons for not attending? The top three reasons cited by millennials were that the church was not personally relevant (35%), they believed that they could find God elsewhere (30%), and they believed that they could teach themselves what they needed to know (17%) (Barna Group, 2013).

The idea that church attendance is irrelevant surfaces again and again. Julia Duin, a religious editor for the *Washington Times* and author of the book *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful are Fleeing and What to Do About It*, writes about what she learned from interviewing people who have stopped attending church. Some, she notes, are simply bored with attending; they believe that

the church has become irrelevant. Others described the church as being out of touch with the reality of their lives. Many commented that the messages preached in church have little to do with their daily lives (Duin, 2009).

The reasons for non-attendance are quite well researched. In my dissertation, I have a long appendix that categorically lists all of them (Burch, 2010). However, I wanted to go deeper. What was missing from these studies was data about the reasons churchgoers attributed to non-attenders. Since I had experienced the inaccuracy of my own perceptions, I wondered how close the reasons non-attenders give (“acknowledged reasons”) for their non-attendance are to the reasons churchgoers attribute to non-attenders (“perceived reasons”). In the process of finding answers to this question, I came upon a big surprise.

How Perceptions Become Attribution Errors

To answer this question, I turned to attribution theory, “one of the most popular conceptual frameworks in social psychology” (Hewstone, 1983, p. ix). Fritz Heider is widely considered “the founding father of attribution theory” (Weiner, 1980, p. xv). In his groundbreaking book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, Heider (1958) describes the core of attribution theory, “In everyday life, we form ideas about other people and about social situations. We interpret other people's actions and we predict what they will do under certain circumstances” (p. 5). This is also true for people who attend church: they, like all people, have ideas about people who do not attend church. They are attributors.

Attenders form ideas about non-attenders and generate perceptions as to the reasons why they do not attend church. A well-established tenet of attribution theory is that attribution making is often not completely accurate (Harvey, Weary, & Stanley, 1985, p. 3), sometimes generating “a web of erroneous myths and proverbs” (Hewstone, 1983, p. 4). Previous researchers have drawn attention to inaccurate attribution-making by church attenders. Referring to the reasons so many church attenders became non-attenders between 1960 and 1990, Hadaway (1990) reported that “misinformation abounds” and “myths” persist (p. 120). Rainer (2001) conducted research aimed, in part, at “shattering myths about the unchurched” (p. 33). The pervasive tendency of attributors to overestimate the importance of personal factors relative to environmental factors has been called the “fundamental attribution error” (Weary, Stanley, & Harvey, 1989, p. 30).

Comparing the Reasons Given with Reasons Attributed

How do the real (acknowledged) reasons given by non-attenders compare with the attributions (perceptions) of churchgoers? The two groups and the factors researched in this study can be envisioned as follows (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Non-attenders v. Attenders

Non-attenders	<i>Acknowledged</i> reasons	Actual reasons given by people not going to church regularly.
Attenders	<i>Perceived</i> reasons	Reasons assumed by churchgoers to be the reason why non-attenders don't go to church.

To discover the actual (*acknowledged*) and the assumed (*perceived*) reasons for church non-attendance in Pacifica, a convenience sample of 1,160 adult residents of Pacifica (632 attenders and 528 non-attenders) was selected. Data were collected using two self-administered questionnaires, one for attenders,¹ and one for non-attenders.² Data from attenders were collected in cooperation with the leadership of local churches. Data from non-attenders were collected at various locations in Pacifica, including the local supermarket.

Fifty-five specific reasons for non-attendance were gathered from the literature and given to non-attenders and attenders. Attenders were asked to rate these reasons using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*) to measure their attitudes towards these 55 reasons for non-attendance. The same 55 specific reasons were also given to non-attenders. The groups were asked to rate the reasons in view of their perception of why people were not attending. This process resulted in two sets of data, one from attenders, one from non-attenders. Factor and reliability analyses and a series of independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine and compare the acknowledged and perceived reasons for church non-attendance in Pacifica. In addition, several open-ended questions were included, which permitted respondents to express acknowledged and perceived reasons or their non-attendance in their own words.

The Results of the Study

When the answers of the 632 adult churchgoers were compared with the answers of the 528 non-attenders, it became clear that people attending church may make assumptions about their non-attending neighbors which may not be accurate. The reasons given by attenders are not the reasons non-attenders give. They tend to mirror what researchers have termed the fundamental attribution error.

To unpack the findings of this study, we will first assign the real reasons

¹Attenders were defined as adult residents of Pacifica, California who attended a weekly Christian church service at least twice per month.

²Non-attenders were defined as adult residents of Pacifica, California who had not attended a weekly Christian church service in the past six months.

given for church non-attendance by the 528 non-attenders to five general categories: (1) church-related, (2) personal decisions, (3) personal priorities, (4) personal preconceptions, and (5) personal disconnects. The five categories are briefly explained and illustrated below.

1. Church-related. Reasons for church non-attendance are clearly directed at the church, and in most cases, are explicitly negative. For example, the church's tone is too authoritarian, or sermons are too focused on hell.

2. Personal decisions. Reasons for church non-attendance are rooted in a personal decision based on a life circumstance or previous church interaction. For example, a person may have moved and never started attending church again, or someone stopped attending during a divorce and never returned.

3. Personal preconceptions. Reasons for church non-attendance are rooted in a personal preconception that church attendance will be a negative or non-worthwhile experience. For example, they see the church experience as being too boring, or non-attenders fear they would not be able to relate to the people at church.

4. Personal disconnects. Reasons for church non-attendance are rooted in a sense of personal disconnect from the church, typically related to spirituality and/or the inability to connect meaningfully with a church service. For example, doubting God's existence or living a lifestyle that is seen as incompatible with participation in a church.

5. Personal priorities. Reasons for church non-attendance are rooted in personal priorities other than church attendance, such as sleeping in on Sunday mornings or being too busy to make time for church attendance.

Why Church Leaders May Get It Wrong

The data analysis revealed that churchgoers had a similar problem as I had when I first started to converse with people in the Pacifica coffee shop. They misperceived the real reasons people do not go to church. Here are four specific ways these misperceptions happen.

Churchgoers Underestimated the Influence of Reasons Related to the Church. Church attenders in Pacifica attributed more importance to the four personal factor categories (2–5) than to church-related factors. In fact, they rated church-related reasons (category 1) as least influential for non-attendance in Pacifica. They did not seem to appreciate the importance non-attenders assign to church-related reasons (category 1). Non-attenders, in marked contrast, indicated just the opposite: their church non-attendance was most influenced by issues related to the church (category 1). They wrote in things like: “The church lacks tolerance,” “The church is too judgmental,” or “The church is out of touch with today's world.” Notice the gap in the ranking of the categories by attenders ver-

sus non-attenders. This discrepancy amounts to a serious example of the fundamental attribution error, the pervasive tendency of attributors to overestimate the importance of personal factors relative to environmental, in this case, church-related, influences (Weary, Stanley, & Harvey, 1989, p. 30). Table 1 captures the difference in ranking between the two groups of respondents.

Table 1

A Lack of Understanding of the Importance of Church-related Issues

Non-attenders	<i>M</i>	Attenders	<i>M</i>
Church-related Issues	2.97	Personal Priorities	3.63
Personal Preconceptions	2.92	Personal Preconceptions	3.26
Personal Disconnects	2.89	Personal Decisions	3.14
Personal Priorities	2.58	Personal Disconnects	3.10
Personal Decisions	2.14	Church-related Issues	2.85

M = Mean Score³

Overemphasis on the Influence of Personal Issues. Nine of the ten top reasons attenders attributed to non-attendance were personal issues. Only one, “Experienced a serious disappointment with a church leader (or leaders),” was directly attributable to the church (see Table 2). Again, attenders overestimated the importance of personal issues relative to church-related issues and, thus, in all likelihood, committed the fundamental attribution error.

Misperception of Priority Reasons. The majority of attenders believed non-attenders would rather do “other things” than attend church on Sunday mornings. Three of their four highest-scoring perceived reasons for nonattendance were as follows: (1) “Too busy to make time for church attendance,” (2) “Sleep in on Sunday mornings,” and (3) “Involved with other activities on Sunday morning.” Attenders considered these reasons highly influential. Non-attenders did not. For example, on the first reason, “Too busy to make time for church attendance,” 80% of attenders felt this was a real reason for non-attendance, but only 25% of non-attenders agreed. Non-attenders did not score any of these three reasons among their “Top 10 Real Reasons” for church non-attendance (see Table 2). The top two reasons for church non-attendance, according to a clear majority of non-attenders, were, “Church is not required to be a truly religious person” (71% of non-attenders); and “Have no motivation to go to church” (60% of non-attenders).

³Although the mean scores for attenders ($M=2.97$) and non-attenders ($M=2.85$) for the church-related issues factor were similar, in this instance the fundamental attribution error was related to *ranking*, not mean score. Nonattenders ranked the church-related issues factor the least influential of five; hence, non-attenders overestimated the importance of personal factors relative to church-related, and, in all likelihood, committed the fundamental attribution error.

Table 2
Top 10 Perceived Reasons for Church Non-attendance

Top reasons as perceived by attenders	Top reasons as perceived by non-attenders
1. Have no motivation to go to church	1. Church attendance is not required to be a truly religious person
2. Too busy to make time for church attendance	2. Have no motivation to go to church
3. Sleep in on Sunday mornings	3. Would disagree with the church's views on sexuality
4. Involved with other activities on Sunday morning	4. The church lacks tolerance for different beliefs
5. Parents didn't encourage church attendance	5. The church's tone is too authoritarian
6. Started making my own decisions and decided not to attend church	6. The church is out of touch with today's world
7. Experienced a serious disappointment with a church leader	7. Started making my own decisions and decided not to attend church
8. Would disagree with the church's views on sexuality	8. A desire to arrive at religious beliefs apart from church
9. Lifestyle is incompatible with participation in a church	9. The church is filled with hypocrites
10. Spouse (or significant other) does not attend	10. Would not connect meaningfully with a church service

The Great Disconnect. When the 55 rating responses of the two groups were compared on a reason-by-reason basis, there was a significant difference between attenders and non-attenders in 45 of the 55 cases. In 82% of the comparisons, attenders significantly misperceived the real reasons for church non-attendance as acknowledged by non-attenders. The difference became even more pronounced when we analyzed the write-in responses that allowed attenders and non-attenders to express perceived or acknowledged reasons in their own words. Many of the respondents took advantage of this option, resulting in 799 handwritten responses (404 from attenders, 395 from non-attenders). When we analyzed the responses, we noted that attenders were

five times more likely than non-attenders (97 attenders versus 19 non-attenders) to cite personal issues, and often disparaging ones such as being lazy, apathy, fear, and selfishness (see Table 3). Even these qualitative data seem to confirm that churchgoers tend to misattribute non-attendance to personal issues, thus possibly engaging in the fundamental attribution error, the pervasive tendency of attributors to overestimate the importance of personal factors.

Table 3

Freely stated Reasons for Church Non-attendance

Perceived Reasons (expressed by attenders)	#	Real Reasons (acknowledged by non-attenders)	#
Lazy	25	Disinterested	6
Apathetic (indifferent)	23	Lazy	5
Afraid	14	Uncommitted	3
Materialistic	9	Shy	2
Independent	7	Confused	
Uncommitted	6		
Selfish	6		
Guilty (unworthy)	3		
Obligated	1		
Tired	1		
Uncomfortable	1		
Not at Peace	1		
Total	97	Total	19

A Vital Lesson for Church Leaders

Misperceiving the real reasons for church non-attendance demonstrates misguided thinking and blocks the learning necessary to avoid misguided reactions and solutions. According to attribution theory, “people, by and large, behave according to their perceptions” (Harvey et al., 1985, p. 3). Kelley (1972) writes, the process of attribution “undoubtedly effects [the attributor’s] subsequent behavior in the interaction and his attitudes towards the other person” (p. 1). If the perception is that non-attenders are essentially spiritually lazy and apathetic, how inspired will attenders be to reach out to their nonattending neighbors?

Overcoming the fundamental attribution error calls for a new type of leadership. Church growth strategies will falter if they are based on misperceptions about the real reasons for church non-attendance. Attendance decline has been a national trend for some time now. As Christianity is losing its grip on the public square, we can no longer assume that we know what is keeping

people from attending. Even churches still enjoying healthy attendance rates have to face the fact that some of the fixes that used to work no longer work today. If 70% of non-attenders do not even consider church attendance necessary to be spiritual, \$10,000 spent on a flashy direct mailer, inviting every household in the city to a special service, may turn out to be a costly and discouraging mistake. The religious landscape is truly shifting.

In a post-Christendom world in North America, the answers we learned when church attendance was considered the duty of every Christian may not help us much to lead a church that is struggling with attendance today. In fact, the former answers, which often surface in the way we attribute personal failures to non-attenders and as a quick-fix mentality to problem-solving, may actually keep us from truly understanding the situation and designing true solutions. The type of leadership needed in this time of shifting priorities and changing loyalties has been called *adaptive leadership* by Heifetz, Linskey and Grashow (2009). This type of leadership helps organizations face their toughest challenges caused by changing environments and social change in which the old ways of thinking and acting no longer work well.

Adaptive leadership is an iterative process involving three key activities: (1) observing events and patterns around you; (2) interpreting what you are observing (developing multiple hypotheses about what is really going on); and (3) designing interventions based on the observations and interpretations to address the adaptive challenge you have identified. (Heifetz, Linskey and Grashow, 2009, p. 32)

Observing involves taking a step back to see what is going on in the situation. It is, by nature, “a highly subjective activity,” says Heifetz (p. 32). For me (Peter), it meant meeting the very people that never graced the doorsteps of his church and engaging them in real dialogue. It was this dialogue that helped me overcome my own “knowing,” which turned out to be twisted by the fundamental attribution error. For over four decades, such dialogue has been the consistent recommendation of researchers studying the nature of nonattendance in America (Hadaway, 1990, p. 122; Hale, 1977, p. 90; Hoge, 1981, p. 199; Princeton, 1988, p. 4; Rainer, 2001, p. 32). George Hunter, a professor of evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary, writes, “The ministry of caring, intelligent conversation—especially around their questions and doubts—helps to open more secular people to the possibility of faith than any other single approach I know of” (1996, p. 165).

The goal in this step is to make observing as objective as possible. This can be done in many ways. I used a survey method in mixed-method dissertation research. My study also demonstrates the inherent limitations of some research methods. A questionnaire is a static and impersonal means of com-

munication. What would have happened if the church leadership team would have engaged some of their non-churchgoing neighbors in an intentional conversation?

When Tod Bolsinger, then pastor of the San Clemente Presbyterian Church, discovered that their summer slump in attendance had not gotten better in the fall, he was worried, and so was his leadership team. Here, the focus was not on people who never attended church but rather on people who did not return to church as expected after the summer lows. This church kept track of the weekly attendance and thus could document a concern that led to a discussion in the leadership team. It soon became clear that they really did not know what caused the continued decline, so they decided not to revert to the typical worship attendance booster strategies, but rather ask every elder, deacon and staff person to identify three people they knew well but who had not been in church for a few months. Then they asked them to ask their friends three questions based on an Appreciative Inquiry mindset (cf. Branson, 2004):

1. When were you most excited or felt the sense of deepest connection to our church? What was happening during that time in your life and in the life of our church?
 2. What has changed in your life or in the church since then that may have affected your sense of connection or excitement about our church?
 3. What is one wish/hope/dream you have for the future of our church?
- (Bolsinger, 2015, pp. 113–114).

Notice how their questions framed a real dialogue. It allowed the leadership team to gather informed observations and form their own hypotheses of what was really going on. This second step, *interpretation*, is more challenging than observing and describing what it happening. When we interpret, we may reveal our biases. None of us can avoid making interpretations. It is often an unconscious activity that goes on in our brains, which are wired to make sense of what we see and hear. Meaning is often locked in before we have a chance to ask if our perceptions are actually accurate. The fundamental attribution error is most often not a conscious, but automatic, bias. For this reason, we lay out our observations and venture into interpretation. Heifetz recommends we learn to listen for the “song beneath the words” and to remember that “even with the most careful thought out interpretation will still be no more than a good guess” because “we can never have all the data needed to form a complete picture” (Heifetz, 2009, p. 34).

Engaging in this process of interpreting allows us to look for patterns we may not normally notice. We may question the interpretations themselves. Leaders may have to learn to hold more than one interpretation about an observation open as the group views a problem from several perspectives.

Making your interpretation known to others risks disrupting the favored interpretation of others. For this reason, adaptive leaders tentatively make them, watching how close to the mark they come.

When Bolsinger's leadership team brought all their observations together and started sharing their interpretations, they realized their original hunches that led them to focus on how to increase worship attendance had to be corrected in the light of what they had heard from the former attenders. They discovered a need to strengthen the web of connections for people going through life transitions, which turned out to be a much more difficult challenge than just tweaking the worship service to make it more attractive (Bolsinger, 2015, p. 117).

Unfortunately, many church leadership teams never experience the fruitful learning process that allows leaders to gather real data, moving misguided attributions. Once you have laid out a more accurate interpretation of the reality you have observed, the question is, what will you do about it? Now it is time to design an intervention that addresses the problem in line with the purpose of the organization. Many Christian leaders are discovering that leading their organization through change and transition is a necessity that requires its own set of skills.

The Christian church today is called to further the kingdom of God in an environment of unprecedented change. Change is the specialty of our Lord Jesus. Watching Him prepare His disciples to become world changers, through which He could impact the world, is a fascinating lesson in leadership development. Interestingly, Jesus utilized a learning model that helped Him continually challenge the perceptions of His disciples, correct their misattributions and interpretations, and teach them the art of disrupting the status quo. Designing leadership development programs that help leaders be courageous agents of change that are not blinded by their own biases is still one of Christian leadership programs' greatest challenges today. The Andrews Leadership Program has made this quest its core passion.

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