

PANDEMIC ANNIVERSARY: CHRISTIANS AND CHURCHES – SUCCESSFUL OR UNSUCCESSFUL?

By Bob Young

Daniel Harrell, Editor in Chief of *Christianity Today*, recently shared part of a letter received from a reader, reflecting on the current state of evangelicalism.

...one's beliefs are revealed not by what one professes but how one lives and orients one's life. A distorted anthropology suggests that people are most shaped by what they think. ... This Enlightenment carryover fails to capture the older biblical insight of Augustine that we are mostly shaped by our loves. If we love fame, power, and money, then our church work is just an enabling idolatry. If we look at what churches and parachurch ministries measure for success—nickels, noses, and social media clicks—we begin to see the depth of our problem. Where in evangelical churches and ministries is a pattern reflective of the self-denying, self-sacrificing, “take up your cross daily” spirituality of Jesus? We are left with a head-trip superficial overly politicized consumerist faith that does not get deeply embedded in our bodies or our behavior. That scandals happen in this context is not surprising.

We are nearing an anniversary—the pandemic has been a primary reality in our lives for almost a year! Christianity has been placed under the microscope. The priorities of Christians and churches have come into clearer focus. What defines us? What activities are essential to our mission? Is our mission God's mission? Over the past year, many churches have pushed evangelism, outreach, and missions into secondary positions.

After sharing the above quote, Harrell called attention to the correspondent's reference to the love of “fame, power and money.” What do we measure? What are the marks of success? Churches have long pointed to “bodies, budgets, and buildings.” How shall we measure success during a pandemic? Many churches have counted “nickels, noses, and social media clicks.” An important principle of life, and of church work— “What you count is what matters to you!” Look at the reports in church bulletins—attendance, contribution, clicks. Few and far between are churches where weekly reports include baptisms, daily Bible readers, or evangelistic conversations.

Every Christian, every church, should be interested in the answer to the question posed by the title above. Are you spiritually successful or unsuccessful? In the first century, being a disciple of Jesus was daring and demanding. Today in many churches, being a disciple of Jesus requires little. The problem is that a focus on attracting people and dollars has dangerous consequences – the whole counsel of God is less likely to be proclaimed, those present are less frequently challenged to leave their comfort zones, sermons and studies isolate verses out of context, the gospel message of salvation loses its urgency and primacy.