

## **“THE CHURCH OF OPRAH”**

In the fall of 2005, Oprah Winfrey entered her 20th season as the celebrated host of The Oprah Winfrey Show. In those two decades, she has amassed over \$1.4 billion, assembled a U.S. television audience of more than 49 million viewers each week (not including her broadcasts in 122 other countries), and informed her viewers on matters ranging from genocide in Rwanda to the best-tasting oatmeal cookies.

According to a 2006 article in USA Today, however, Oprah's influence entered the spiritual realm at the turn of the century: "By the late '90s, Winfrey's focus was Change Your Life TV, and a New Age message was more prevalent. She preached making the message of her life—take responsibility, and greatness will follow—the substance of the show. Keep a personal journal, purchase self-indulgent gifts, take time for you because you deserve it. The notes rang true to millions of viewers."

Going even further, Cathleen Falsani, religion writer for the Chicago Sun-Times, suggested: "I wonder, has Oprah become America's pastor?" There is evidence to support this theory. A November 2006 poll conducted by Beliefnet.com—a site that looks at how religions and spirituality intersect with popular culture—found that 33 percent of its 6,600 respondents said Winfrey has had "a more profound impact" on their spiritual lives than their clergypersons. Christ Altrock—minister of Highland Street Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee—claims: "Our culture is changing as churches are in decline and the bulk of a new generation is growing up outside of religion." Altrock claims that people are turning up at what he calls "The Church of Oprah" instead.

This is a reminder that the American church today lives in a culture which rejects the call to deny self, take up one's cross, and follow Jesus. We must avoid the temptation to accommodate our message to a narcissistic world. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. And our message should never change either.