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**Misperceiving the Real Reasons for Non-attendance,  
Attribution Theory**

**Peter Burch, Ph.D.**

My 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 in the year 2000. VDMBC began in the garage of a tract home in the 1950s. After two decades of consistent growth, the congregation dedicated an attractive 200-seat sanctuary in 1976. Regrettably, the next two decades brought consistent decline and, when I arrived as the new pastor in 2000, the church had returned to a garage-sized congregation. Having no staff to direct, secretary to talk to, or walls to paint, I decided to set up "office" in the marketplace of future attenders. With a cup of coffee in hand and laptop open, I would set to about my church work, and on the top of my things-to-do list: meeting the future attenders of VDMBC.

And meet people I did, all kinds: 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, 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'd ask, "Do you go to church?" Most either did not or had not for quite some time. So I'd follow up, "Why don't you go to church?" The reasons they acknowledged were often not in sync with my preconceived notions (perceptions) concerning the reasons for non-attendance in Pacifica. I now had a question that needed to be answered, "What are the reasons for non-attendance in Pacifica?"

In 2003, it was time for me to select a topic for my doctoral dissertation. I desired a topic that was both relevant to my work as a local pastor, and one that might make a unique contribution

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2005

to church growth literature. Determining the reasons for non-attendance in Pacifica (my unanswered question) was patently relevant, but would it make a unique contribution to church growth literature. Generally speaking, studies to determine the reasons for non-attendance were certainly not unique (e.g., Fichter, 1954; Hale, 1977; Hoge, 1981; Princeton, 1978; Princeton, 1988; Hadaway, 1990; Rainer, 2001; et al.). A more specific focus was required. My thoughts returned to how I had misperceived the real reasons for non-attendance. Had other church leaders and attenders likewise misperceived? After much reflection, I decided on a topic and a problem for study: Although formal research on the reasons for non-attendance at Christian churches in America has been conducted, it is not known how these reasons apply to the Pacifica community of California, a suburb of San Francisco. Furthermore, little, if any, research has been conducted to compare the reasons for non-attendance as acknowledged by non-attenders with the reasons as perceived by attenders. The topic was approved and it was hoped that the findings and methodological approach would contribute to the growing scholarship on the nature of non-attendance in America.

In order to discover the real (acknowledged) and perceived reasons for non-attendance in Pacifica, 1,160 adult residents of Pacifica, 632 attenders and 528 non-attenders, were surveyed. Attenders were defined as adult residents of Pacifica, California, who attend a weekly Christian church service at least twice per month. Non-attenders were defined as adult residents of Pacifica, California, who have not attended a weekly Christian church service over the past 6 months. The sample of attenders was identified in cooperation with the leadership of local churches. The sample of non-attenders was identified at various locations in the community, primarily at the local supermarket.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the findings and recommendations, it is important to introduce the conceptual framework for the study—*attribution theory*. Attribution theory has been called “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) elucidated 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). Church attenders, like all people, are attributors. Attenders form ideas about non-attenders and generate percep-

tions 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 et al., 1985, p. 3) and, sometimes, generates “a web of erroneous myths and proverbs” (Hewstone, 1983, p. 4). Previous researchers have drawn attention to inaccurate attribution making by attenders. Referring to the reasons why so many 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).

In this study, over 600 adult attenders were asked to attribute to non-attenders the real reasons for their non-attendance. Did attenders in Pacifica make accurate attributions? Or, did they add to the “mounting evidence” collected by researchers who are increasingly “pessimistic about the ability of humans to process social information in an elaborate and accurate manner” (Hewstone, 1983, p. 9)? The answer, for the most part, was the latter; the attribution making of attenders in Pacifica was *not completely accurate*. This article will highlight the following examples of how attenders in Pacifica misperceived the reasons for non-attendance:

- Attenders misperceived the influence of reasons related to the church
- Attenders misperceived the influence of reasons related to non-attenders
- Attenders misperceived the influence of specific reasons for non-attendance
- Attenders misperceived the influence of certain priorities as reasons for non-attendance

#### *Attenders Misperceived the Influence of Reasons Related to the Church*

According to statistical analysis of the data collected from 528 non-attenders, the real reasons for non-attendance were identified as 5 general factors: (1) church-related, (2) personal decisions, (3) personal priorities, (4) personal preconceptions, and (5) personal disconnects. The 5 factors are briefly explained and illustrated below:

1. *Church-related*. Reasons for 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, too much preaching about hell.

2. *Personal Decisions*. Reasons for non-attendance are sourced in a personal decision based on a life circumstance or previous

interaction with the church. For example, moved and never returned to church; or, stopped attending during a divorce and never returned.

3. *Personal Preconceptions*. Reasons for non-attendance are sourced in a personal preconception that church attendance will be a negative or non-worthy experience. For example, the church experience is too boring; or, would not be able to relate to the people at church.

4. *Personal Disconnects*. Reasons for non-attendance are sourced 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 the existence of God; or, lifestyle is incompatible with participation in a church.

5. *Personal Priorities*. Reasons for non-attendance are sourced in personal priorities other than church attendance; for example, sleeping in on Sunday mornings; or, too busy to make time for church attendance.

According to attenders, the factor *least* influencing non-attendance in Pacifica was the *church-related* factor. Attenders considered all four *personal* factors *more* influential than the church-related factor (See Table 1, Column 2). Attenders, in other words, were consistently more likely to perceive the reasons for non-attendance related to the personal issues of non-attenders, not in issues related to the church. Non-attenders, in marked contrast, acknowledged just the opposite. According to non-attenders, their non-attendance was *most* influenced by issues related to the church (See Column 2). Specific reasons included: *the church lacks tolerance, or the church is too judgmental; or the church is out of touch with today's world*. This misperception by attenders is an 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 et al., 1989, p. 30).

Table 1

Attenders Rate Church-related Issues Most Influential, Non-attenders Least Influential  
M=Mean Score. See Note.

Non-attenders	M	Attenders	M
<b>Church-related Issues</b>	<b>2.97</b>	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

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2007

## Misperceiving the Real Reasons for Non-attendance

71

Personal Decisions 2.14      **Church-related Issues** 2.85

*Note:* Although the mean scores for attenders ( $M=2.97$ ) and non-attenders ( $M=2.85$ ) for the church-related issues factor were similar, the fundamental attribution error, in this instance, was related to *ranking*, not mean score. Non-attenders 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.

The  $M$  score was based on the following scaled responses to the reasons for non-attendance.

Strongly Disagree.....	1.00
Disagree .....	2.00
Neither Agree nor Disagree .....	3.00
Agree .....	4.00
Strongly Agree.....	5.00

*Attenders Misperceived the Influence of Reasons Related to Non-attenders*

Attender misperceptions were also apparent in the Top 10 perceived reasons for non-attendance (as expressed by attenders). Only 1 of the 10 highest scoring reasons—*Experienced a serious disappointment with a church leader (or leaders)*—was directly attributable to the church (see Table 2). The other 9 reasons were more directly related to one of the personal factors. Again, this finding suggests that attenders overestimated the importance of personal issues relative to church-related issues and, thus, in all likelihood, committed the fundamental attribution error.

Table 2

Top 10 Perceived Reasons (as expressed by attenders)

Reasons

1. Have no motivation to go to church
2. Too busy to make time for church attendance
3. Sleep in on Sunday mornings
4. Involved with other activities on Sunday morning
5. Parents didn't encourage church attendance
6. Started making my own decisions and decided not to attend church
7. *Experienced a serious disappointment with a church leader*
8. Would disagree with the church's views on sexuality
9. Lifestyle is incompatible with participation in a church
10. Spouse (significant other) does not attend

*Attenders Misperceived the Influence of Specific Reasons for Non-*

*attendance*

Fifty-five (55) specific reasons for non-attendance comprised the response section of the questionnaires used in this study. Both attenders and non-attenders were required to respond by agreeing or disagreeing with each of the 55 reasons (See Table 1, *Note*). When the responses of both 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 other words, in 82% of the comparisons, attenders significantly misperceived the real reasons for non-attendance as acknowledged by non-attenders. Simply stated, perception is not always reality.

Attenders and non-attenders were provided the opportunity to freely-state a specific reason for non-attendance. When these 799 handwritten responses (404 from attenders, 395 from non-attenders) were analyzed, attenders were 5 times more likely than non-attenders (97 to 19) to cite personal issues, and often disparaging ones like lazy, apathy, fear, and selfishness (see Table 3). If these data turned out to be representative of the total sample, it would be further evidence that attenders committed the *fundamental attribution error*, the pervasive tendency of attributors to overestimate the importance of personal factors.

Table 3

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

*Attenders Misperceived the Influence of Certain Priorities as Reasons for Non-attendance*

The majority of attenders believed non-attenders would rather do other things than attend church on Sunday mornings. Three of the four highest scoring perceived reasons for non-attendance 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 agreed this was a real reason for non-attendance, but only 25% of non-attenders agreed. In fact, non-attenders did not score any of these three reasons among their Top 10 Real Reasons for non-attendance (see Table 4). The top two reasons for 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 agreed); and—*Have no motivation to go to church* (60% of non-attenders agreed).

Table 4

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Top 10 Real Reasons (as acknowledged by non-attenders)

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## Reasons

1. Church attendance is not required to be a truly religious person
2. Have no motivation to go to church
3. Would disagree with the church's views on sexuality
4. The church lacks tolerance for different beliefs
5. The church's tone is too authoritarian
6. The church is out of touch with today's world
7. Started making my own decisions and decided not to attend church
8. A desire to arrive at religious beliefs apart from church
9. The church is filled with hypocrites
10. Would not connect meaningfully with a church service

*A Vital Lesson for Church Leaders*

Misperceiving the real reasons for non-attendance is not only misguided thinking, it very well might result in misguided behavior. 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). To illustrate, if their perception is that non-attenders are essentially lazy and apathetic spiritual sloths, how inspired for outreach will attenders be? To further illustrate, imagine a church spent \$10,000 on a spiffy direct mailer inviting every household in the city to a special service. After only two families showed up, the church conducted a survey and learned that 70% of non-attenders do not even consider church attendance necessary to be truly spiritual. Quite the costly and discouraging misperception! Other examples could be forwarded, but the basic lesson is: *Church growth strategies will falter or fail if they are based on misperceptions about the real reasons for non-attendance*. Apart from clear guidance from God, church leaders should be hesitant to launch growth

strategies apart from reliable data on the real reasons for non-attendance in the community.

*Learning the Real Reasons for Non-attendance*

Ask non-attenders. Yes, the answer is obvious and dialogue is the only way to avoid widespread misperception and the fundamental attribution error. For over three decades, such dialogue has been the consistent recommendation of researchers studying the nature of non-attendance in America (Hadaway, 1990, p. 122; Hale, 1977, p. 90; Hoge, 1981, p. 199; Princeton, 1988, p. 4; Rainer, 2001, p. 32). This study demonstrated that it is possible, using survey research, to gain critical insight into the real reasons for non-attendance in any given community. A questionnaire, however, is static and impersonal. A better approach would be an upsurge in caring, evangelistic dialogue between attenders and non-attenders. Dialogue not only limits misperception, it opens the door for or more important purpose—evangelism. Hunter (1996) 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” (p. 165).

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2007

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