

How the Political Divide Has Contributed to Church Decline

Churches across America continue to experience decline in attendance, and people are attending services less often.

Some are questioning this truth.

One of the doubters is Glenn T. Stanton, author of *Myth of the Dying Church: How Christianity Is Thriving in America and the World*. The data in the book asserts that church attendance in the United States is at an all-time high, both in raw numbers and as a percentage of the population.

Are we sure whom to believe?

Despite Stanton's book, the statistics and the data from multiple sources reveal the American church is in decline.

Pew Research reported:

The data shows that just like rates of religious affiliation, rates of religious attendance are declining. Over the last decade, the share of Americans who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month dropped by 7 percentage points, while the share who say they attend religious services less often (if at all) has risen by the same degree. In 2009, regular worship attenders (those who attend religious services at least once or twice a month) outnumbered those who attend services only occasionally or not at all by a 52%-to-47% margin. Today those figures are reversed; more Americans now say they attend religious services a few times a year or less (54%) than say they attend at least monthly (45%).

One of the big questions is, What's the reason people are leaving the church?

According to Christian Smith, sociology and religion professor at the University of Notre Dame, America's nonreligious lurch has mostly resulted from three historical events: the association of the Republican Party with the Christian right, the end of the Cold War and 9/11.

Very interesting.

One stream of thought is that churches and ministries during the '70s began intermingling politics with the pulpits of America.

The '70s brought a variety of changes in both culture (secularism) and politics that swept through our nation.

The '70s were the decade where the culture experienced repeated cultural shifts. Drugs, sex and rock-n-roll were the mantras of those decades.

Few tie today's statistics from the last four to five decades to today, but we connect them.

Let's tie it together.

A Look at 1990

During the '90s many nonprofits and churches began the intertwining of the pulpit with political spins. Many church denominations gathered their audience according to their progressive or conservative values.

For instance, the stand the Catholic Church embraced on abortion has been a main force in adding members to the pew for decades. Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists experienced similar outcomes from different values.

In the 1970s through the 1990s, the church cruised through three decades of spiritual robustness, all tied to tributaries that connected to the politics of the age.

In the '90s, the cultural shift from the '70s showed itself in churches, and early in the 21st century, the decline opened the doors for thousands to leave the church.

Derek Thompson of *The Atlantic* wrote:

“Deep into the 20th century, over 9 in 10 Americans said they believed in God and belonged to an organized religion, with the great majority of them calling themselves Christian. That number held steady – through the sexual-revolution '60s, through the rootless and anxious '70s, and through the ‘greed is good’ '80s.”

The bigger question: Are politics and church decline synonymous?

Some say yes.

Churches that assert political views from their pulpits and expect others to accept those views are questionable. Yes, all churches.

Believing we are right on an issue never means we are correct. And to assert our political views above our Christian values is choosing the lesser over a greater.

The main purpose of the pulpit is to empower people in spiritual matters and to train people to think for themselves.

When Christians place politics above their Christianity, they position themselves wrongly. It is acceptable to have strong political views. But when we express those views with more passion than our Christian values, we miss the mark.

“Politics can drive whether you identify with a faith, how strongly you identify with that faith and how religious you are,” said Michele Margolis, a political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. “And some people on the left are

falling away from religion because they see it as so wrapped up with Republican politics.”

We have not looked at the connection between liberals and conservatives who attend church. This gives a very interesting twist to the statistics.

Political ideology and religious identity are connected.

Yes, there are political and church values that cross over, but when we look at the Scriptures, the Bible backs up many of the cultural topics we value.

So we must look at how our political affiliations affect our spiritual decisions.

In fact, the majority of Democratic voters are religiously affiliated. But the more liberal you are, the less likely you are to belong to a faith; whereas if your conservative, you're more likely to say you're religious.

So we see that liberals and some conservatives have left the church because of the conservative stance of the church and the Bible.