

Is Christianity Really in Numerical Decline in America?

Do recent polls really tell the full story here in America? Is it true that Christianity is experiencing a serious, ongoing numerical decline? Those polls could well be accurate, speaking of a major spiritual crisis in our nation. But there may be a different way to understand what is happening, one that points to separation and refining more than to backsliding and apostasy.

First, let's look at the results of the most recent Pew Research Center poll.

As reported on Oct. 19, "The religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip. In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular,' now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009."

Additionally, "Both Protestantism and Catholicism are experiencing losses of population share. Currently, 43% of U.S. adults identify with Protestantism, down from 51% in 2009. And 1 in 5 adults (20%) are Catholic, down from 23% in 2009."

Most significantly, "More than 8 in 10 members of the Silent Generation (those born between 1928 and 1945) describe themselves as Christians (84%), as do three-quarters of Baby Boomers (76%). In stark contrast, only half of Millennials (49%) describe themselves as Christians; 4 in 10 are religious 'nones,' and 1 in 10 Millennials identify with non-Christian

faiths.”

What are we to make of this? And do these figures truly indicate that Christianity is in numerical decline in America?

There is certainly a problem when it comes to the younger generations, which identify as Christians at an alarmingly lower rate than did their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

That cannot be minimized or denied.

Yet, at the same time, “self-described Christians report that they attend religious services at about the same rate today as in 2009. Today, 62% of Christians say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month, which is identical to the share who said the same in 2009. In other words, the nation’s overall rate of religious attendance is declining not because Christians are attending church less often, but rather because there are now fewer Christians as a share of the population.”

And this is what makes me wonder about what these poll numbers really represent.

You see, as I travel around the country, I’m constantly speaking in congregations that are growing and multiplying. They are adding more services. They are expanding their buildings. They are planting new satellites. And, to my knowledge, they are not the exceptional, out-of-the-ordinary outliers. There are many others like them.

And it’s not just a matter of lateral transfer, meaning that they are growing at the expense of other churches, as members from Congregation A leave for Congregation B. That certainly happens, to some extent.

But many of these churches are seeing new converts on a regular basis, both young and old. And they are seeing lots of

enthusiasm among their congregants.

One of my colleagues holds major rallies in different parts of the nation, and thousands of young people come flocking for days, eager to worship the Lord and hear the Word. They are hungry. They are thirsty. And they are representative of many others who recognize that “there must be more.”

Of course, some of today’s church growth is more a matter of numbers than maturity, as people respond to a consumer-oriented, watered-down version of the gospel that is not the gospel at all. So, the church buildings may be packed, but real disciples are few.

Yet there are plenty of other churches that are thriving and growing precisely because they are preaching a biblical message and precisely because people are encountering the risen Savior. Jesus is being exalted, and as a result, both the saved and the lost come flocking. People will be drawn to the fire!

What, then, are we to make of these poll numbers, which have been quite consistent for the last decade-plus?

Certainly, I have no desire to stick my head in the sand or deny reality.

But I wonder if the better explanation for the numerical decline is that formerly nominal Christians no longer identify as Christians at all. In other words, it is those who rarely attended church in the past and who had no real relationship with God who are now identifying as “nones.”

To be sure, this does not explain everything, and there are certainly many who are agnostic today who were passionate and committed in the past.

But based on my experience, and as I look at these numbers, I wonder if this is not what we have known to be true for

decades now: Liberal Christianity cannot withstand the test of time, and so these churches will bleed members and decline. In contrast, a Bible-based, Jesus-exalting, Holy Spirit-welcoming assembly that truly cares about people will grow and thrive.

When you have a few minutes, please read these two 2015 articles: "The Terrible Failure of the Secular Gospel" and "Why Conservative Churches Are Still Growing."

In the first article, I referred to the insights of the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, who pointed out in the 1970s that "Religion that is 'more of the same' is not likely to be very interesting." Why would worldly people make a deep commitment to a worldly religion?

In the second article, I referred to a 1972 book by Dean M. Kelley, in which he wrote, "Amid the current neglect and hostility toward organized religion in general, the conservative churches, holding to seemingly outmoded theology and making strict demands on their members, have equaled or surpassed in growth the early percentage increases of the nation's population."

As for the liberal churches, Kelley stated, "The mainline denominations will continue to exist on a diminishing scale for decades, perhaps for centuries, and will continue to supply some people with a dilute and undemanding form of meaning, which may be all they want."

Does this explain what we are seeing today? Could it be as simple as this? Churches that no longer hold to the authority of Scripture, along with those that have the form of religion without the substance, are in decline, while those that seek to preach and live a vibrant faith are growing.

This much is sure. The old dictum of G.K. Chesterton is as relevant as ever, challenging today's preachers, pastors, leaders and believers: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."

And that means the challenge for each of us today is clear: Preach the real gospel. Live the real gospel. And ask the Spirit to back the real gospel.

Do this with all your heart and soul, and you will never be disappointed. {eoa}