

Is the American Church About to Die Off?

Is this the beginning or the end of the church in America? Is the church in America in decline?

Yes, for sure.

Most days, my inbox includes at least one post or blog about the American church. In many parts of America, people are attending services less or unplugging from church altogether.

This is certainly a story.

The greatest stories have beautiful endings. The greatest storyteller of all times is Jesus. His story and His church will end with victory, power, beauty and glory.

Is the church finished? Absolutely not.

U.S. church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s. The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade. In 1998 through 2000, 1 in 10 Americans with no religious preference said they belonged to a church, as did an average of 7% in the past three years.

In 20 short years, we have seen a 20% decline in church attendance. These numbers are shocking and true.

Does the mission of the church change because fewer people are attending? No.

God will just do His work with fewer people.

“Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armor, ‘Come, and

let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. Perhaps the Lord will work for us. For the Lord is not limited to save by many or by few'" (1 Sam. 14:6).

God completes His work with few or with many. God using fewer people does not change the Scripture or the mission of the church.

A lack of attendance never changes the plan of God.

The Church Has a Mission

A missional perspective teaches that the church has a mission because Jesus had a mission.

Here is an excerpt from :

What does it mean to be missional? "Missional" or "missional living" is a Christian term that, in essence, describes a missionary lifestyle. Being missional includes embracing the posture, the thinking, behaviors and practices of a missionary in order to reach others with the message of the gospel. The term "missional" gained its popularity toward the end of the 20th century and is beginning to influence the American church on a wide scale.

One definition says that the "missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. When the church is in mission, it is the true church."

Though many churches have mission statements or talk about the importance of having a mission, where missional churches differ is in their attitude toward the world: A missional church sees the mission as both its originating impulse and its organizing principle. It is patterned after what God has done in Jesus Christ; that is, to be missional means to be sent into the world – not to expect people to come to us. This

idea differentiates a missional church from an “attractional” church.

Many churches make the mistake of confusing “the church” as the mission of God, rather than knowing the church has a mission.

God created the mission first, and then He created the church to fulfill His mission.

The mission never changes, but the methods are always changing.

The mission of the church preceded any buildings or gatherings of believers. We can actually accomplish the mission of the church without buildings, hierarchy or religious activity.

God can fulfill His mission without buildings or hierarchy, but He has chosen to do it with and through His church.

Christians Are the Church

We have confused who and what the church is. The church is not a building, entity or organization. It is an organism made up of believers.

Our primary mission is not to attend church, though God commands us to gather and assemble. Driving to a church building is a method of attending church with other believers.

Buildings are where we gather, train and encourage one another. These were the methods Christ chose for us.

Here is an example of Jesus gathering and training His disciples:

And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has,

to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand. And seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt. 13:10-17, NKJV).

Training is a method of equipping believers to go to work and move through life being salt and light to our culture.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how shall it be made salty? It is from then on good for nothing but to be thrown out and to be trampled underfoot by men” (Matt. 5:13, MEV).

Salt preserves, heals and flavors. The church preserves our culture, heals wounds and flavors communities.

Training is a method to accomplish the mission. Our mission is to reach and encourage those who do not know Christ.

Could the reason people are not attending church be that God never intended for us to solely go to church but to be the church?

In my post “How the Church Connects and Collides with

Culture," I wrote:

Is the church obsolete? The organized church is experiencing a mass exodus of regular attenders. Are people losing faith or just dumping the church? We aren't sure.

The church will survive and even thrive.

Can we skip attending church services and still love Jesus? Yes. However, the Scripture commands us to gather in His name.

Church expert Carey Nieuwhof says: I have to remind myself that, mostly, my desire to skip, pull away and do my own thing on my schedule isn't solitude; it's isolation. And while solitude is a gift from God, isolation is a tool of the enemy. And there's no faster way to render a community ineffective than to isolate its members.

Yes, the church is in transition. Transition is not a surprise to God and is not unusual with God or His people.

Remember when the children of Israel left Egypt? Transition.

They walked through the wilderness. Transition.

During transition, God is always out in front.

"Remember this, and show yourselves men; bring it to mind again, O transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My good pleasure'" (Isa. 46:8-10).

Take notice that God finishes and then begins: "declaring the end from the beginning." God had a plan and then began. He finished the church, and then He started.

It's not the ugly end, but a beautiful beginning. {eo}

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