

Is the Church Dying or Are Christians Just Falling Away?

Is the church dying? Apparently, that depends on whom you ask. Indeed, the life or death of the church of Jesus Christ that was founded more than 2,000 years ago on the **Day of Pentecost** is a topic of debate in some evangelical circles.

Ed Stetzer, the president of LifeWay Research, author, speaker, pastor, church planter and missiologist, recently penned an article in *Christianity Today* entitled, “The State of the Church In America: Hint: It’s Not Dying.” His opening sentence makes it abundantly clear where he stands. There’s no tip toeing around the issue or trying to avoid offending anyone who disagrees.

He says, in five words: “The church is not dying.”

“Yes, the church in the West—the United States included—is in transition right now. But transitioning is not the same as dying, particularly if you hold the belief that Christianity is represented by people who live for Christ, not check ‘**Christian**’ on a survey form,” Stetzer writes.

“While I believe we need to understand reality inside our ranks, I don’t believe the situation is quite as dire as many are making it out to be. Actually, no serious researcher believes **Christianity** in America is dying. Not one.”

Steve McSwain begs to differ. McSwain, who describes himself as an award-winning author, speaker, thought leader and spiritual teacher, responded to Stetzer’s article with a snarky question: “Really? What cartoons have you been watching?”

McSwain then points to information from the Hartford Institute of Religion Research citing that more than 40 percent of

Americans “say” they go to church weekly. As it turns out, however, he points out, less than 20 percent are actually in church. In other words, he notes, more than 80 percent of Americans are finding more fulfilling things to do on weekends.

“Furthermore, somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 churches close their doors every year. Southern Baptist researcher, Thom Rainer, in a recent article entitled ‘13 Issues for Churches in 2013’ puts the estimate higher. He says between 8,000 and 10,000 churches will likely close this year,” he continues. “Between the years 2010 and 2012, more than half of all churches in America added not one new member. Each year, nearly 3 million more previous churchgoers enter the ranks of the ‘religiously unaffiliated’.”

OK, so fewer people are going to church. That’s a **sign of the times**, if you ask me. But how does that prove that the church is dying? Saying the church is dying—DYING—seems like an anti-biblical perspective. I mean, correct me I have misinterpreted the holy Scriptures, but wasn’t it Jesus who said, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it”? (Matt. 16:18).

I suppose one could argue that the church that’s dying is not the church Christ is building. But, from my perspective, it seems like the church that Christ is not building—that **false church** that endorses homosexual lifestyles and refuses to otherwise call sin a sin—is thriving in the age of humanism.

There are many reasons why people don’t go to church. Pharaoh is working some of them to near death. Others have been spiritually abused by **pastors** and don’t want anything to do with the church. Still others are watching televangelists on Sunday mornings because they don’t feel like getting gussied up and driving across town. Yes, sometimes it’s just that simple.

The reasons why people aren't going to church—or why people are leaving the church—go on and on. But make no mistake. The church of Jesus Christ is not dying. Jesus is still building His true church. That may mean in these last days that there are fewer believers flocking to organized religious buildings, but that doesn't mean the church is dying. It may mean more are opting for home church or some other alternate form of fellowship in the name of Jesus. And it absolutely means we need to get out on the American mission field and preach the gospel.

“Bad stats and hyperbole do just that—demoralize God's people,” Stetzer concluded. “Today, we need a mobilized mission force in the midst of this mission field. So, it's time to time to work for the sake of the gospel, and to live for the cause of the gospel, not run around proclaiming the sky is falling.”

What's your take? Sound off in the comment box below.

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