

Why Do So Many People Distrust Beloved Pastors?

Pastors may not be perfect, but we expect to be able to trust them. We expect them to tell us the truth in love—even when it's not what we want to hear. We expect them to live honest lives. Are we expecting too much? Have a handful of high-profile **pastor** scandals left us skeptical? Or are pastors just victims of an increasingly secularized society?

Americans' rating of the honesty and ethics of the clergy has fallen to 47 percent, according to a new Gallup poll. That's the first time this rating has dropped below 50 percent since Gallup first asked about the clergy in 1977. According to the pollster, clergy have historically ranked near the top among professions on this measure, hitting a high rating of 67 percent in 1985.

By way of context, nurses are the most trusted profession, followed by pharmacists, grade school teachers, medical doctors, military officers and police officers. Clergy ranked seventh on the list—and higher than judges, nursing home operators, bankers, newspaper and TV reporters, members of Congress and salespeople.

But the bottom line is the American public's trust in clergy is sliding downward. So what's going on? If you believe Gallup's Art Swift, Americans probably base their honesty and ethics ratings of professions on various information sources.

"One is clearly stereotypes of the kinds of people who enter into certain professions, with Americans generally holding car salespeople, lobbyists, and lawyers in lower regard, even though there are surely some honest people working in those professions," he says. "A second source could be Americans' own real-world experience with people who work in those

professions. A third important source are news stories, particularly scandals, involving certain professions.”

Swift offers interesting insights about real-world experience and scandals. I believe both are relevant to the **pastor** trustworthiness question. Do I believe the declining trust rating is because so many **pastors** have fallen into public sin? That may be a contributing factor, as well as the number of Christians who have been spiritually abused or otherwise hurt at the hands of their **pastors**. But I believe those are smaller brush strokes in the bigger picture. More on that in a minute.

First, keep in mind that this Gallup poll wasn’t taken exclusively at churches. So it’s not a direct reflection on how much Christians trust their **pastors**. But it is a direct reflection on how an increasingly secular society views clergy—and it’s quite likely that some who were polled are Bible-carrying, churchgoing, born-again believers.

I occasionally enjoy watching television from the 1950s. (*Leave it to Beaver* is one of my all-time favorites.) Even silly black-and-white sitcoms treat clergy as members of society that deserve the highest levels of trust. Doctors move aside when the **pastor** comes in to pray for the sick. Drunkards straighten up when the priest walks by. Even rebels without a cause show some reverence for ministers in shows from the 1950s and 1960s. But over the decades, just as the fabric of American society has been sullied, so has the reputation of **pastors**.

So, yes, I am sure that real-world experience and scandals factor into the distrust picture. But I believe the bigger issue is an **antichrist spirit** that works against the credibility of all those who stand in the pulpit and the public square declaring Jesus is Lord. I believe as American society has done away with school **prayer**, has legalized **abortion** and has elected government officials who are working against the principles of our Constitution, we’ve drifted

farther away from God, and many don't want to hear what **pastors** have to say.

The bottom line: People don't trust pastors the way they used to—and it's largely not the pastors' fault. The sin-rocked churches are really few and far between when compared to the larger body of Christ. Our ultimate trust should be in God, but if people can't trust **pastors**, then the enemy can keep them away from the truth that they proclaim. Pastors deserve our utmost respect. They aren't perfect people, and they may disappoint us or even hurt us at times. But they are standing in the line of fire day in and day out. We need to pray for our pastors, and we need to pray for our nation.

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