

5 Christian Leaders Tackle Falling Away of This Christian Group

As America's slide toward secularization quickens and the opposition to Christians practicing their faith grows louder, one of the casualties is nominal Christianity—the practice of identifying as Christian but bearing little evidence of the new birth. While on the surface such news may appear worrisome, there are rays of hope beyond the clouds that portend a stronger and perhaps more evangelistically vibrant church.

In May, the Pew Research Center released an extensive follow-up study to a groundbreaking 2007 report on religion and public life. The follow-up survey conducted between June and September 2014 polled 35,000 Americans and revealed a markedly shifting religious landscape affecting all regions of the country.

While the United States remains home to more Christians than any other nation, the percentage of American adults describing themselves as Christians fell from 78.4 percent in 2007 to 70.6 percent today.

Over the same time frame, the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” climbed more than six points, from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent. And the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths rose from 4.7 percent in 2007 to 5.9 percent in 2014.

What triggered the 8 percent drop in the Christian share of the population in just seven years? A persistent hemorrhage within mainline Protestant denominations (falling from 18.1 percent to 14.7 percent) and within the Catholic Church

(dropping from 23.9 percent to 20.8 percent) fueled the decline.

And many of those who drifted away were millennials, especially on the younger edge of the 18-35 age range.

Immediately after the study's release, mainstream media headlines started screaming that the sky was falling and Christianity was dying.

But check out what's been occurring within America's evangelical ranks. While American society as a whole may be becoming less Christian, American Christianity is becoming more evangelical. According to the research, while the evangelicals' share of the overall U.S. population fell slightly from 26.3 percent in 2007 to 25.4 percent in 2014 based on denominational affiliation, the percentage of U.S. adults who self-identify as evangelicals rose from 34 to 35 percent (59.8 million to 62.2 million). Evangelicals now constitute America's largest religious group.

What does all this mean? *Decision* asked five Christian leaders to help decipher the Pew findings and to enumerate what steps Christians can take to further God's kingdom. Overall, these leaders remained upbeat about the future because they know God is in charge and is still moving throughout history.

When it comes to the uptick in the number of the religiously unaffiliated, Kevin DeYoung, senior pastor of University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan, said: "It used to be even if you weren't really born again or were barely connected to church, there was still some cultural pressure to call yourself a Christian."

Not in 2015. In today's highly charged cultural arena, the benefits of being affiliated with Christianity are ebbing. As a result, people who may have had a past nominal commitment to Christianity have no qualms today checking "none" on a survey box.

DeYoung explained: “We’re seeing more and more people saying, ‘Yes, I’m agnostic,’ or ‘Yes, I’m atheist,’ and not fearing they’re going to be considered pariahs in the society. In fact, they may be viewed as more erudite, more enlightened.”

But, ironically, instead of flocking to liberal denominations, people with liberal social and political views are instead rushing to the exits—especially millennials. “The mainline churches have been in utter free fall for decades,” said Thomas Kidd, professor of history at Baylor University and associate director of its Institute for Studies of Religion. “If you’re merely conforming to the surrounding culture and just parroting what it is saying about morality, the nature of people, and so forth, why would you keep going to church? You can get that from all kinds of cultural sources.”

Trevin Wax, managing editor of LifeWay Christian Resources’ The Gospel Project, agrees. “Cultural Christianity is not saving faith,” he said.

Indeed, Jesus said: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

Wax added, “When the church simply echoes what society is saying, the church becomes irrelevant and is no longer needed.”

That’s why evangelical churches must remain anchored to Scripture and maintain biblical fidelity when the winds of culture blow with fury, says Joseph Stowell, president of Cornerstone University. “What’s happening is the winnowing of the American church,” he said. “But as long as the evangelical church stays true to Christ and to the Word of God, it will always be an attractive alternative to an empty and hollow culture.”

So how then should Christians live? Gregory Frizzell, who has studied prayer and spiritual awakenings and has more than 30

years of pastoral, evangelism and missions experience, looks to the early church for answers—and what may be a prelude for something greater.

“Talk about opposition, the early church couldn’t have faced a more hopeless situation,” Frizzell said. “And yet these believers were so empowered by the Spirit, they turned their world upside down. Along with strong biblical preaching, they practiced fervent united prayer, deep repentance and total surrender to Christ’s Lordship.”

Frizzell says a brief “God bless us” prayer on the run won’t cut it for the deepest spiritual battles. Rather, Christians must learn to “go to war” in prayer for friends and relatives. “They must unite with other believers in intense prayer and fasting, claiming God’s promises in faith. Their prayers must go from broad and general to petitions like ‘draw specific lost people to Himself, open their eyes, bring deep conviction and tear down strongholds that are preventing their salvation.’”

Frizzell emphasized that such prayer is well within the reach of all believers because of God’s grace and Spirit.

DeYoung says God is impressing on him to pray for open doors to share his faith with people who don’t know Jesus. “The Lord is eager to hear and answer those prayers,” he said. “Instead of this research leading us to fear and panic, it should lead us to pray, ‘Lord, send people into the fields that are white unto harvest. Send me.’”

What’s also needed, Stowell says, especially to reach millennials, is a “clear, unapologetic, uncompromising, winsome presentation of the gospel that announces the Good News that Jesus will forgive your sins, meet the deepest needs of your life and bring about wholeness.”

That kind of gospel declaration in the language millennials can understand will bear fruit, Stowell said.

While evaluating the ramifications of the Pew findings, Kidd said his heart is growing even more burdened for those nominal Christians who are now statistical “nones.”

“My concern is for their eternal destiny and their need for Jesus,” he said. “Our message should be compelling, that Christ is their only path to life and only hope for salvation. When we proclaim that the gospel is the most important message in the world and that they should give up their life to find it in Christ, that will get people’s attention, no matter how old they are.”

For Wax, the stark truth of the Pew research is that the mission field is moving further away, not closer, in terms of receptivity to the gospel. Evangelism, then, will be more difficult because people may not believe in God, or understand who Jesus is and why He came.

“Evangelism will require more than one conversation and multiple touch points of direct involvement in people’s lives, so that spiritual conversations can take place,” Wax said.

“I can look at the data and the challenges ahead and say, ‘This is enormous.’ But at the center of my faith is a crucified Messiah who walked out of His grave on Sunday morning. And so I press forward with hope.”

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