

IS CHRISTIANITY IN DECLINE? BY BOB WALDREP

“In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

The above statement is the headline for a report released by the Pew Research Center last month (October 2019). It draws the stated conclusion based on a comparison of polling done during 2018 and 2019 with that done a decade earlier, in 2009.

Here are some of the key findings in this report as it relates to trends in the U.S. adult population.

65% identify as Christians (down from 77% in 2009).

26% identify as “religious nones” – religiously unaffiliated (up from 17% in 2009).

43% identify as Protestant (down from 51% in 2009).

20% identify as Catholic (down from 24% in 2009).

When these numbers are segmented by age groups it reveals that 84% of those born between 1928 and 1945, the so-called “Silent Generation” identify themselves as Christians. As do 76% of “Baby Boomers”, those born between 1946 and 1964. However, only 49% of Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1986 describe themselves as Christians. 40% of Millennials identify themselves as religious “nones” and 10% identify with non-Christian faiths.

When you consider the actual numbers involved the data is even more concerning. In July of 2019 the U.S. Census Bureau reported the U.S. adult population as being approximately 256 million, which means about 167 million

(65%) of them identify with Christianity and 67 million (26%) identify as religious “nones”. In 2009 there were approximately 233 million adults in the U.S., meaning some 179 million (77%) identified with Christianity and 39 million (17%) were “nones”.



All of this points to the fact that even as the U.S. adult population was increasing, the “self-identifying” Christian population was decreasing. Consider that during the same decade in which the religious “nones” increased by almost 30 million (from 39 to 67 million) those identifying with Christianity actually decreased by some 12 million.

This decline also means there has been a decrease in church attendance. Pew found that, “17% of Americans say they never attend religious services, up from 11% a decade ago.” Perhaps, most disturbing is the decline in attendance among those who attend church services at least once a week. 37% of the adult population said they attended church at least once a week in 2009. Today that number has dropped to 31%. Those who seldom attend or only attend a few times a year is 37% of the population – in 2009 it was similarly, 36% of the population.

When polls like this come out it is not unusual to hear someone dismiss it by saying you can make a poll say whatever you want by how you ask the question. There is truth in that statement. However, when it comes to the topic at hand, these numbers are consistent with polls taken by other organizations.

For example, a 2018 Gallup Poll found that 33% of the population attend church weekly or almost weekly (Pew was 31%). A 2016 report from Christian pollster Barna, found that 73% of the population identified as Christian (Pew was 65%; however, a 2014 Pew poll was more in line with Barna finding that 71% identify with Christianity – this may mean the 2019 poll is more of an outlier or it may indicate just how much the culture has shifted in the last five years since the Barna poll was taken).

Interestingly, a separate poll conducted by Pew in March of 2019 found that while 55% of Americans believe that religion does more good than harm in American society, 78% believe religion is losing influence in American life (77% of identifying Christians believe this).

So how is this impacting our culture. For one, the Christian Church is not only losing its influence but is decreasing in number, as well. In 2018 Thom Rainer of Church Answers reported that each year some 6,000 to 10,000 churches are closing their doors. This means that 100-200 churches will close the week you read this report about.

Perhaps even more concerning is that, with the decrease of Christian influence, Americans are turning from once firmly held biblical beliefs and practices to an

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openness to those once considered abnormal to the faith or associated with other religions. (Refer to “Culture Tracks” in this issue for some of these.)

It is imperative for Christians to maintain a commitment to solid biblical teaching and theology even if, and especially when, it means going against the mainstream views held in culture. Christians must embrace again our calling to first and foremost be true to Christ and the gospel in all instances.

It is also important that the Church renew its calling to seize every opportunity to share the gospel. In a 2016 survey Barna asked, “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Christians have a responsibility to evangelize others.” Only 26% of respondents “strongly” agreed with this statement and another 20% agreed somewhat. A staggering 35% of those responding “strongly” disagreed.

That same Barna survey found that while 75% of Americans say they pray to God, less than 20% regularly attend

Sunday School (17%) or a small group (16%).

75% of Americans pray to God; less than 20% regularly attend Sunday School or a small group

Clearly, the Church must also commit to a renewed focus on discipleship for those the Lord entrusts to them for care and development. Without a strong emphasis on Christian education and training there will be a continuing decline of the Church and its influence in society.

This is not the first time there has been such a wide culture shift in the life of the church. The question is will Christians – will the church – rise up and make the necessary course correction in their own life. Thom Rainer put it quite well stating, “The greatest peri-

ods of church growth, particularly in the first century, took place in adversarial cultures. We are not hindered by external forces; we are hindered by our own lack of commitment, selflessness, and evangelistic urgency. Hear me well church leaders the choice is simple: change or die.”

“You are the salt of the earth but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again?”

Matthew 5:13



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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Share your thoughts on this and other topics of concern in today's culture. Even if it's the same as ours we appreciate knowing what you think.

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Culture Tracks

WHEN IT COMES TO WHAT AMERICANS BELIEVE/PRACTICE, “THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING”

| BELIEF | |
|--|---|
| MORAL TRUTH HAS NO SET STANDARDS | 64% Adults agree with this statement. (Barna 2002) 48% of Evangelicals agreed with it. (Pew 2015) |
| GOOD WORKS RESULT IN GOING TO HEAVEN | 25% Strongly agree; 30% agree somewhat (Barna 2016) |
| BELIEVE IN GOD AS DESCRIBED IN THE BIBLE | 56% Believe this (Pew 2018) 23% believe in higher power/force (not God of Bible) |
| BIBLE WRITTEN BY MEN — IS NOT THE WORD OF GOD | 37% Millennials believe it. (Public Religion Research Inst 2012) 14% All Adults believe Bible is Fables/Legend (Gallup 2018) |
| SEX APART FROM MARRIAGE MORALLY ACCEPTABLE | 69% Agree — was 53% in 2001 (Gallup 2018) |
| COUPLES WHO LIVED TOGETHER BEFORE MARRIAGE | 19% in 1988; 31% in 1996; 37% in 2002 (Gallup Polling) |
| NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS CAN LEAD TO ETERNAL LIFE | 50% of Protestants and 43% of Evangelicals believe some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life (Pew 2015) |

If you have any questions or would like more information about these polls, email us at info@crosswindsfoundation.org



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“I’m glad I showed this film to my children. I wish I had it ten years ago. It would have made our reintegration so much easier.” Staff Sergeant, US Army—Three Deployments