



Marketing Religion American Style

By Garry W. Johnson

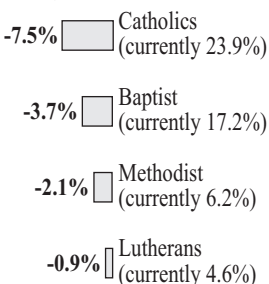
The United States has long been touted as the "land of opportunity." A place where people are free to do what they want to do, say what they want to say and believe what they want to believe. In the diverse and dynamic religious landscape of the U.S., one can find a backing for most any secular or spiritual belief they choose to indulge. With 78.4% of U.S. adults self-reporting a Christian affiliation, it might appear this is indeed "one nation under God."

This same study, by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, also shows, however, that Americans either have a widely-varying and ever-changing view as to what constitutes "Christianity," or they have other criteria in mind when choosing and re-choosing a church.

The liberal media suggest the findings show religion to be a marketable commodity. "There is something disquieting about shopping for religion the way one would pick among latte at Starbucks," chimes-in the editorial page of *USA Today*, two days after the survey was released.

Wondering flocks

Pew found that 44% of all adults are no longer tied to their religious or secular upbringing. Of those, 28% left for another religion or no religion and 16% switched between Protestant traditions. Religions and traditions with the greatest net loss between new members switching in and those switching out: (Current percentage of U.S. adults)



Source: 2008 Pew Research Center

But do any of the religions marketed to the U.S. public actually reflect the true faith described in the pages of Scripture? And if not, could that be the reason for so much restlessness among those seeking the only true God? Or, are they actually seeking God at all?

Before we delve into these questions, lets take a look at what the Pew research and several other studies have found over the past year or so.

SURVEY SAYS

Writing for *Time* magazine, Jackson Dykman says, "Americans love to shop, even for religion. More than 40% of U.S. adults have changed their faith since childhood, many opting for no faith at all. That's the key finding of a major study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which surveyed 35,000 people in five languages to create the most detailed portrait yet of the country's religious landscape.

"The study found that the fastest-growing religious group is people without any religious affiliation. But that doesn't mean the U.S. is experiencing a secular surge. Most in this group aren't atheists; they just describe their religion as 'nothing in particular.'"

This group of unaffiliated believers, the *nothing in particular* crowd, came in at 12% of the total — which was subdivided into "secular unaffiliated" (6.3%) and "religious unaffiliated" (5.8%).

The secular group, who said religion is unimportant to them, is statistically the same as the Methodist denomination (6.2%). The religious group, those who said religion is at least somewhat important, now outnumber Lutherans (4.6%). Taken as a whole, the group outranks every denomination and tradition except Catholics (23.9%) and all groups of Baptist combined (17.2%).

When you add this semi-religious group with U.S. Atheist (1.6%) and Agnostics (2.4%) you get the 16.1% of the survey who make-up the unaffiliated total.

Almost 20% of all U.S. men and 13% of all U.S. women are in this group. As well

as 25% of U.S. adults under age 30 — which brings us to an August 2007 study from LifeWay Research, the investigative arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.

LifeWay surveyed 1,023 Protestants ages 18 to 30 who said they attended church at least twice a month for a minimum of one year during highschool and found 7 in 10 quit attending by age 23. Of those, 34% said they had not returned by age 30, not even sporadically. That averages out to about 1 in 4 Protestant young people who have left that faith completely.

LifeWay associate director Scott McConnell said about the survey, "It seems the teen years are like a free trial on a product. By age 18, when it's their choice whether to buy in to church life, many don't feel engaged or welcome." Those who dropped out of the Protestant churches (the survey questioned both evangelicals and mainline Protestants) were more than twice as likely as those who stayed to describe church members as judgmental (51% for dropouts, 24% for those who stayed), hypocritical (44% vs. 20%) or insincere (41% vs. 19%).

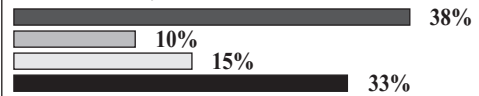
LifeWay did another study, this one on the "unchurched," or those who had not attended a religious service in a church, synagogue or mosque for any reason in the last six months. The survey found more than one in five Americans, 22%, fell into this group, the highest number ever recorded by the survey. In 2004, the figure was 17%.

Not surprisingly, many of the

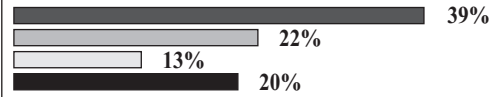
Views of the "unchurched"

People who have not attended a religious service in six months say:
 Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree

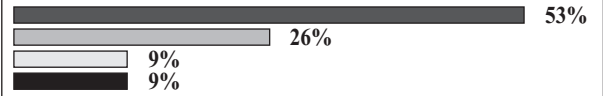
There exists only one God, the God described in the Bible



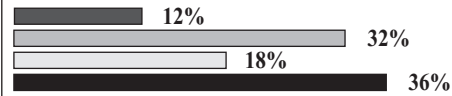
The God of the Bible is no different from the gods or spiritual beings depicted by world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.



I think Christianity today is more about organized religion than about loving God and loving people.



Christians get on my nerves.



Source: LifeWay Research, Nashville, based on a national survey of 1,402 adults. Margin of error +/-2.5 percentage points.

"unchurched" were shaky on Christian basics, with just 52% agreeing that "Jesus died and came back to life." Sixty-one percent said the God of the Bible is "no different from the gods or spiritual beings depicted by world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.," although Buddhist philosophy has no god and Hindu worship many.

Eighty-six percent of the unchurched say they believe they can have a "good relationship with God without belonging to a church." And 79% say "Christianity today is more about organized religion than loving God and loving people."

Perhaps this is why Pew found the major Christian denominations are losing numbers so fast, with only nondenominational churches showing growth outpacing losses.

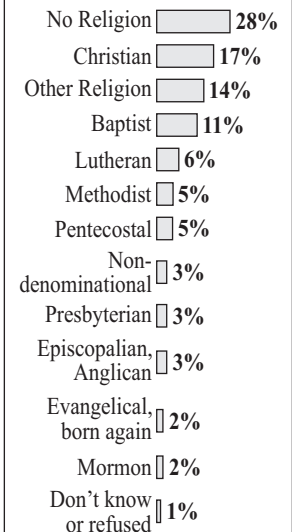
In the October 2007 article "Do-it-yourself Christianity" (*USA Today*), Pastor Henry G. Brinton lamented this phenomena, "This is a serious concern to pastors like me, who serve churches associated with what used to be the 'trusted brands' of Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, United Church of

Christ, and Presbyterian Christianity. These mainline denominations grew through the 1940s and '50s but began to lose numbers about 1965. Today, some are one-third smaller than they were 40 years ago.

"In their place, independent and community churches have appeared. Some have congregational leadership and stand alone, while others are denominational churches that are simply dropping

Leaving the fold

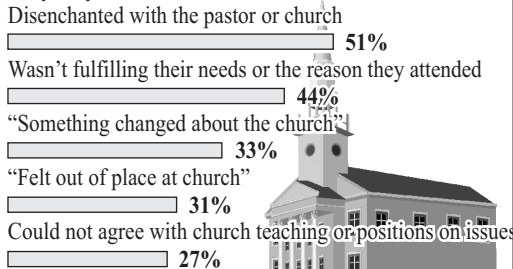
Nearly 9.5 million people have switched from the Catholic faith, according to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey. Where they say they went:



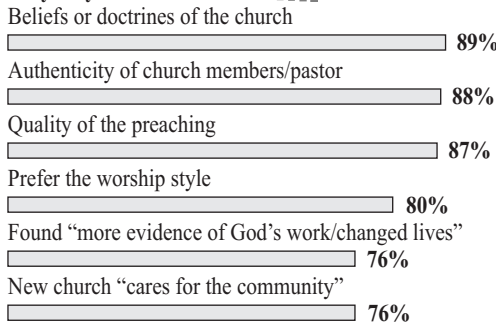
Source: Religion in a Free Market by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, based on their 2001 American Religious Identification Survey

Why people change churches

Why they left their old church¹



Why they chose a new church¹

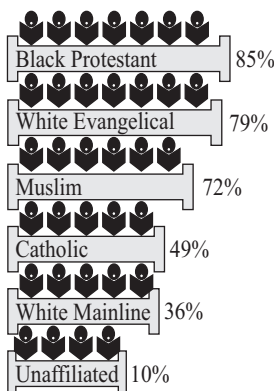


1- Respondents could name more than one reason

Source: LifeWay Research survey of Protestants. Based on 415 respondents who switched churches but had not made a residential move; margin of error +/- 3.9 percentage points.

Importance of faith

By denomination, the percentage of people who say religion is very important to their lives:



Source: 2007 Pew Research Center survey of Muslim Americans and Pew Global Attitudes project surveys from 2005 and 2006; Margin of error from +/- 5 to 9 percentage points

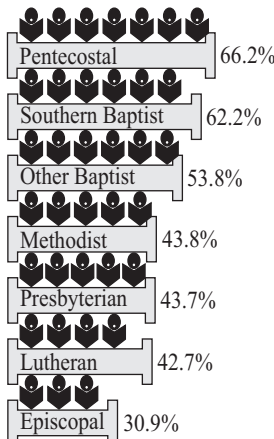
'Baptist' or 'Methodist' from their names in an effort to attract more worshippers. For instance, a congregation near Detroit called Temple Baptist became North-Ridge Church in 2000 to avoid the possible negative connotations of being Baptist. Its pastor, Brad Powell, says it is 'a non-denominational Bible-believing church.'

'Congregations with 'community' in their title became the largest group of Protestant churches in the country in the 1990s, including Saddleback Community Church in California and Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois. ...

'Grace Chapel, an independent congregation with 2,100 members in Englewood, Colorado has no mysterious denominational name

Devout Protestants

Percentage of Protestant adults who say they attend church services once a week or almost once a week, by denomination:



Source: Combined results, Gallup polls conducted March 2002 to September 2006. Margin of sampling error up to +/-6 percentage points.

such as 'Presbyterian' to act as a barrier, and it requires no insider knowledge in order to participate in services. ...

"Few people will join my church simply because it is Presbyterian, just as a shrinking number of people will buy a car because of loyalty to General Motors. Consumers today want a product with the best features, whether it is a church with a dynamic youth program or an automobile with an excellent crash-test rating."

Pew found that of the 51.3% of Americans who called themselves Protestant, roughly one-third were "unable or unwilling" to describe their denomination. LifeWay released a study in 2007 showing those who switched churches without making a residential move 54% of the time changed denomination too. Fewer than half (44%) said denomination was an important factor in choosing a new church.

"Fluidity is the rule today, not the exception," said John Green, a political scientist and Pew Forum senior fellow. "There's greater diversity and greater movement — a quantum leap in the rate of change.

"It will become increasingly difficult to find people who share a love for distinct doctrine," he adds.

"But there are always niches in the marketplace. There will always be a place for religions that are strict. They just may cater to smaller numbers."

THE LITTLE FLOCK

Jesus Christ began His earthly ministry among a community of people who for thousands of years had His will for them written down in text which they revered — but almost none of them understood.

The Jews had become dependant on the scribes and Pharisee, the "trusted authorities" of their day. Relying on their rich religious traditions handed down from generation to generation, they had so corrupted the intent of the Scripture that the truth was unrecognizable to them.

As Christ began to explain and clarify their misconceptions, all that heard Him "were astonished at His doctrine" (Matthew 7:28; 22:33, etc.), most believing that it was something "new" (Mark 1:27).

Jesus was quick to point out, "My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me. If any man will *do His will*, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself ..." (John 7:16-17, emphasis mine throughout). Jesus understood that no one would truly comprehend His doctrine until they were willing to *do what He taught*.

He further told the Jews "no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" and

"except it were given unto him of my Father" (John 6:44, 65).

The situation today is much the same as it was then, and therein lies the problem with marketing religion — you cannot sell God to the unbeliever or the deceived!

Jesus offered discipleship to a mere handful of men with the simple command, "follow me." He comforted those who obeyed with the words, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

Even the public in general heard the invitation, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ..." But few

Key to chart

Size of circle shows percentage of U.S. adult population in that major religious group. Sectors of circle show size of major denominations within that group.

Note: Percentages do not total 100 because of rounding. Chart designed by Jackson Dykman, *Time* magazine. Recreated by Garry W. Johnson, for *MOUNTAIN REVIEW*. Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

responded to the call. "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).

At the conclusion of Jesus' three- and - a - half-year ministry, He had a grand total 120 disciples (Acts 1:15).

Even today, the true Church of God is small in number, "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14).

The unconverted heart still veivis God's instruction with contempt, seeing His doctrine as "strict," but Scripture is clear that "this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3).

True Christians today seek to do the things which please God. They carefully consider the doctrines espoused by an organization and search "the Scriptures daily, whether those things are so" (Acts 17:11).

True converts to the faith of Christ were never brought to spiritual conversion by the "salesmanship" of a human evangelist. No emotionally-packed religious service or high-pressure alter call brings one to true repentance. God does not use daycare service or personalized doctrines to draw people into the

Church — these are human ideas which have no basis in Scripture.

Conversion is a process, and that process only begins upon true repentance (Acts 3:19).

The word *repent* is translated in the New Testament from the Greek *metanoeo*, which literally means "to perceive afterwards" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, "repent").

It conveys the concept that one must recognize and admit his sins and acknowledge the need to change his mind, heart and behavior.

The word *converted* is translated from the Greek *epistrepho*, which means "to turn about" or "turn

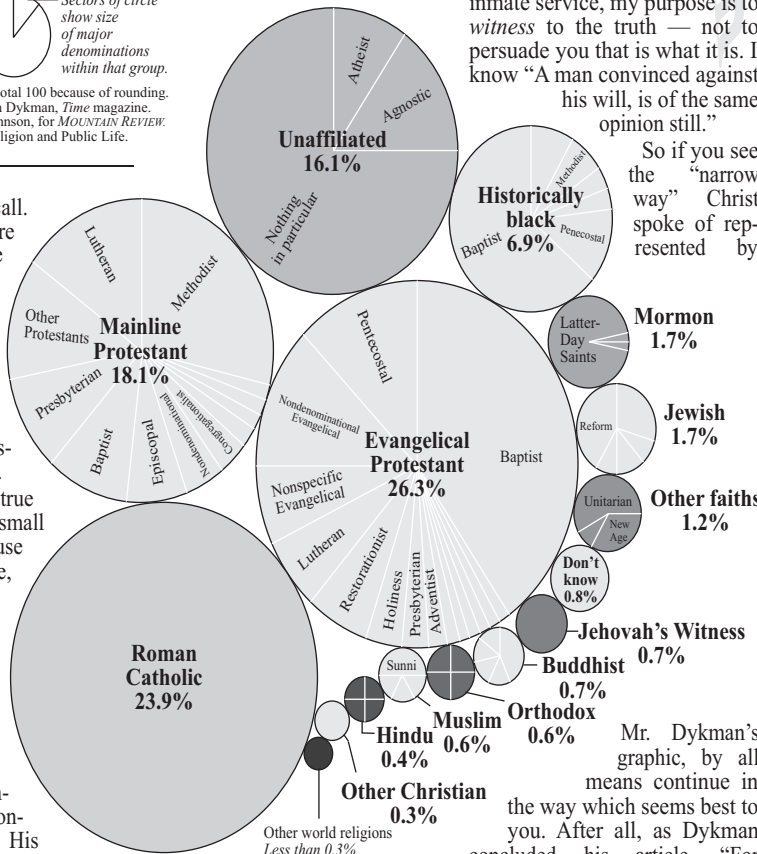
human life, the necessity and function of His Church or the transforming Power which is His Holy Spirit — we confess the world's churches to be social clubs, to which we readily sell membership. These things ought not to be so.

"COME LET US REASON TOGETHER"

The subheading comes from Isaiah 1:18, which is part of a powerful message to God's people. Our Father does not expect His children to mindlessly follow any organization or religious leader, no matter how popular or well established.

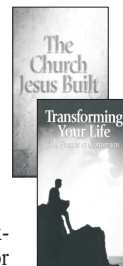
Furthermore, it is not *my intention* to sell you on any doctrine or belief. When I write articles on religion or speak at the Saturday inmate service, my purpose is to *witness to the truth* — not to persuade you that is what it is. I know "A man convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still."

So if you see the "narrow way" Christ spoke of represented by



Mr. Dykman's graphic, by all means continue in the way which seems best to you. After all, as Dykman concluded his article, "For America's faithful, it's a buyer's market."

But if you are one of the restless seekers searching for the truth in a marketplace of conflicting ideas, I invite you to compare one last doctrine to what the Bible actually says. Write for the free booklets, *The Church Jesus Built* and *Transforming Your Life, The Process of Conversion*. Both publications are offered free of charge to all who request them, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is not for sale (Matthew 10:8)! ✎



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