

Declining Church Attendance

Over the last year congregations have either canceled their regular services, scaled back on the times they met during the week, or have split services due to COVID19. Especially during the early days of the pandemic, congregations had some on-line services. Brethren may grow use to the convenience of “worshipping at home” and not returned to the assemblies as congregations at their normal meeting times. The result has been declining church attendance.

Just this past week, I saw two headlines on this subject. With the title, “State of The Church” a survey conducted by the religious organization Barnea, stated in actual numbers, declined 36% in weekly attendance compared to 1993. The article makes the point this is due to the Gen Z and millennials who are replacing the older generation. In other words, the younger do not consider religion and church attendance as important than their elders. In 2000, 45% of those surveyed considered themselves practicing Christians. Over the last nineteen years that number has declined to just one in 4 people considering themselves to be “practicing Christians.

In a separate article with the headline, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time” dated March 29, 2021, I read the following:

American’s membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.

Thus, two separate polls show the same data which says people are not attending church. Some of the data for 2021 may be skewed due to the pandemic and social isolation but the trend was already there before 2020. I do believe many of the Lord’s people have grown spiritually weak during the shutdown and are finding it difficult to return to worship. But there is more to this than just the effects of COVID19 and the pandemic.

Preaching a social gospel causes spiritual weakness. Appealing to people on

the basis of recreation, entertainment, and food is appealing to people's carnal desires. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, the Gospel of Christ is the power of God for salvation, Romans 1.16. It is hard to get that message across when your main emphasis is social in nature. The fact is, many places are better at recreation, entertainment, and providing food than a church. They are called gyms, movie theaters, and restaurants.

Preaching everybody and everything is OK with God makes the Gospel of little importance. Jesus died on the cross because we sin against God and in such a condition we are lost. He spoke of the Holy Spirit's role in John 16.8, "And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:" On the Day of Pentecost the people were pierced in their soul. "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37) Congregations who did not preach the need for salvation will be lost.

Preaching an unbalanced message will ultimately hurt church attendance. By unbalanced I mean lessons which are all negative or all positive, lessons which stress one area of study at the expense of the rest of the Bible. One congregation wanted every Gospel Meeting to be on the home. A study of the home is good but what about the work of the church? The whole counsel of God needs to be preached. Frankly, this is one area many preachers struggle with including me.

Not convicting the hearts of young people will cause church attendance to diminish. Back to the studies cited in this article, the younger generations (Gen Z, and millennials) do not see a place for religion in their lives. Some may have been taught the facts in the Bible without the importance of those facts. The generation following Joshua's generation is described in Judges 2.10, "When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel." We need to make sure our children understand the importance of God in their lives.

Our society is growing more isolated. Ironically the technology which helps us stay informed and connected can cause us to replace person interaction with non-personal interaction. Do we spend too much time on our computers and smart phones instead of actually talking to people? One High School had to cancel its football season due to a lack of players. Why such a shortage of athletes? Its young men were more interested in playing with their X-boxes instead of actually playing a real game. To some going to church is too personal, time consuming, and not much fun.

One last thought, for many years religion has been under attack from various groups. Classroom teachers ridicule the Bible and demean students who believe in a God. This used to be confined to college classes but no longer is that true as elementary students are taught to not believe in God. Entertainment has become more ungodly with sexual topic and vulgar language. The Gen Z and millennials have been fed a steady dose of humanism, atheist, and sexualism, can one be surprised they are non-religious?

I do believe the pandemic and lack of social interaction has hurt the Lord's people. We need to place God first which means to come to worship and encourage one another. - - Dennis Tucker