

A Decline in the Number of Christians, Number of Congregations, and Evangelism: Ten Reasons for the Decline

Summarized and posted by Bob Young

[Note: As mentioned in the body of this article, the genesis of the ten points listed below is a research project conducted by Don Petty a few years ago.]

Early in 2006, I saw the updated numbers. Over a three year period, the numbers posted in the directory of churches of Christ declined. (The directory was compiled by Carl H. Royster, published by 21st Century Christian.) The three year net loss was about 12000 members (1%) and almost 200 congregations (1½%). These numbers suggest decadal net loss rates of 3-5%. (Membership decreased from 1,276,621 to 1,265,844 and the number of congregations declined from 13155 to 12963.)

These numbers say one thing. **We are losing more members than we are gaining.** We are experiencing a loss in the number of Christians and the number of congregations. Membership loss occurs in three ways: (1) deaths, (2) members who move away, and (3) members who “drop out”. Membership gains occur in three correlating ways: (1) births, (2) members who move in, and (3) conversions. This simple explanation suggests that several cultural and demographic factors may be at work. (1) Our entire nation is graying, and the birth rate is down among the demographic groups that primarily make up our churches. We are experiencing more deaths than births in most congregations. (2) As the population in the rural communities in which a majority of our churches exist plateaus or declines, the church experiences more “move outs” than “move ins”. Churches in growing, larger metropolitan areas may experience more “move ins” than “move outs”. This leads to a phenomenon which has been described as rural “feeder churches” providing members to urban “receiver churches.” When a church member moves from one church to another, no net gain occurs. In addition, studies show that some members who move also drop out during the process. The closing of rural feeder churches that send their young people away from the community never to return may help explain the decline in the number of congregations. (3) The dropout problem is not being overcome by a sufficient number of conversions. **For this reason I included a decline in evangelism and conversions in the title of this article.**

Don Petty has surveyed and summarized the reasons for the decline. His focus is on the decline in the number of Christians and congregations. Many of the reasons he cites apply also to the decline in evangelism. He compiled a list of 225 reasons drawn from college and university professors, church members, and general conversations and discussions at various church events. He summarized the results in ten primary factors. The ten factors are not in any specific order of importance.

Satan is at work.

For two or three decades after World War 2, the church was very active in evangelism and missions. Thousands were baptized into Christ. Because such efforts act against Satan’s intentions, Satan does not ignore such activity. The church grew through the help of our Lord.

Churches were planted all over our nation and around the world. God used us in our weakness to preach the gospel in its power and purity. Satan continues to work hard so that we will weaken and give in, grow weary and lose our mission.

We have lost our commitment to restoring the New Testament church; we have lost the biblical message of salvation by which God adds the saved to the church and the importance of the church as the body of the saved.

We have stood by while the church in the eyes of the world, and sometime in our own eyes, has become another denomination of believers without the distinction the Lord intended it to have.

We have selected unqualified leaders.

We have selected elders who rule as if they were running a company, lording it over members to put their ideas into practice. Elders must meet the qualifications God has set forth, not the criteria human beings may add. Qualified leaders will function as the Bible describes, not according to historical precedent, traditions, cultural desires or human needs.

We have quit emphasizing teaching (doctrine).

Doctrine is not preached. We have emphasized the life of the church and the needs of the members rather than making the goal the reaching of the lost and soul-saving activities.

We do not know the scriptures.

We have quit studying and have let others, inside the church and outside, influence our beliefs. We do not know what the Lord says on primary points of doctrine.

Leaders and members are not evangelizing.

We have focused on our own needs and desires for an easy Christianity which is fun and enjoyable. We have hired ministers to meet our own needs. The church as a whole does not work to reach others. That would be too hard. Further, we have been convinced that evangelistic endeavors such as gospel meetings, door knocking and home Bible studies are no longer effective.

Preachers are not being trained as evangelists.

Ministers graduate from our ministry training programs without taking an evangelism class. Rare is the pulpit person committed to evangelism. The training in our schools does not emphasize soul-winning.

We are looking inward, not outward to our lost world.

We heap onto ourselves socials and fellowships, comfortable and even elaborate buildings, and 'compartmentalized' ministries that require little time. We do not have congregational programs for study with lost persons. We are unwilling to sacrifice a TV night, a ball game, or leisure time in order to teach a soul the way to Christ.

Christians are worldly, secular, and materialistic.

We measure our life and productivity by the standards of the world—our jobs, successes, accomplishments, travel experiences, raises and promotions, and position in the eyes of our peers and superiors at work. We impress with our stamina or strength or speed, or how well we play a game. We have let the world lead us down a trail with no spiritual value, a trail that often leads to sin.

We want entertaining worship.

We are not content with sober worship, serious heart-felt singing, thoughtful prayers and celebration of Christ's sacrifice. We want outward enthusiasm, humor and levity, stories that tickle our fancy, more like a concert or entertainment production.

You may disagree with the conclusions of Brother Petty. The reality of decline is undeniable. If these are not the reasons, what are the reasons? I challenge you to draw your own conclusions and go to work on them in your home congregation and in your personal life.