

Sermon: Do You Have an Intense Faith?

By Bob Young

Introduction

You have seen the reports – Christianity is in decline, especially among younger adults (millennials). But perhaps not. Leith Anderson recently wrote that “most evangelical denominations are growing, some are plateaued, and a few are declining.” Have you noticed that everywhere around us, new churches are being planted? And many of the churches planted in recent years have become large and influential.

Recently in churches of Christ, we have bemoaned our decline in numbers. We have observed that the growing churches, mostly urban, are often only swelling as a result of member transfer from “feeder churches,” mostly rural. Some are certain that something is wrong with us so they set out a journey to identify what is wrong and to “tweak” the church until we get it right – an almost endless list of what is wrong and what we need to do to get it right.

Numbers are not the only way to measure strength! Larger churches may be weak, smaller churches may be strong. Recent research suggests that one of the most powerful factors in strong faith is intensity. Last week, I wrote about overcoming complacency. This week I share the flip side of the coin! Anderson cites the research of Landon Schnabel (Indiana University Bloomington) and Sean Bock (Harvard University), published in the journal *Sociological Science* (November 2017, Vol. 4), which shows that intense religious faith stays strong even when increasing secularization erodes moderate religious faith. “Rather than religion fading into irrelevance as the secularization thesis would suggest, intense religion—strong affiliation, very frequent practice, literalism, and evangelicalism—is persistent and in fact, only moderate religion is on the decline in the United States.”

Can it be that simple? Is the key the intensity of our faith? Observation supports the claim. What are the characteristics of a church filled with Christians with intense faith? Let me describe to you an intense, growing church I knew well. A large percentage (85-90%) of the members were present every Sunday. Bible classes (Sunday and Wednesday) and Sunday night attendance were at least 70-75% of Sunday worship. Members were involved in a large number of small group activities (80%+ participated in a small group). The talents and gifts of all of the members were used consistently. The membership was evangelistic. The members were committed to assimilating and including new members. With such examples of intensity, you will not be surprised to learn that the church tripled over a 10-year period.

Churches with intense faith will grow – 10-year growth rates of 50%, 100%, even 300% as in the church above will not be unusual. The growth will not be the result of swelling but of saving souls. I see it happening again and again all across Latin America where Christians make their faith the first priority of their lives. New churches, doubling, tripling, multiple church plants. I believe a return to intense faith is possible in the U.S.

How strongly do we believe? How serious are we about our faith? What does our faith motivate us to do? Moderate churches and groups will fail to share the gospel, most will decline. Moderate churches will struggle to reach the unchurched and bring them to Jesus. Convenient Christianity that attracts a community without commitment will be found incapable of producing sustainable growth and new church plants.

In today’s sermon, I explore seven dynamics of intense faith, based on Hebrews 11. Intense faith...

Has confidence in God’s promises, 11:1-6, 11ff

Has conviction about that which is not seen, 11:1-10

Is consistent, 11:7ff

Is certain, 11:17ff

Has clarity about the future, 11:8-14

Makes choices for God, 11:23-31

Conquers, 11:32-40

Conclusion: Intense faith gives faithful witness to the invisible God (conviction) and his faithful promise (confidence).