

## Good News: White Millennial Christians Leaving the Church

The confessing Christian Church seems to do its most effective work when it is in conflict with government, organized religion and in minority. Yet, American Christians will do almost anything to reinforce their illusion of majority status, suggesting, perhaps, that they prefer to avoid the *cost* of doing their best. That seems reasonable, if Christian faith and practice devolves into following the path of human reason.

Meanwhile, growth in the Christian faith is cropping up in the most unlikely places in the world. It will be interesting to follow its effects on the People's Republic of China through the coming decades. Starting with some 1M persecuted believers in 1949 and exploding to over 60M by 2010, projections are that the protestant population in China will reach 160M by 2025 and 247M by 2030<sup>1</sup>. China will likely see the end of communism and will be sending missionaries to a faithless America if this trend continues.

If history repeats itself, however, smug superiority will set in. The mysteries of a gospel that relies on divine strength through the Church's weakness likely will be replaced by denominationalism and sectarian pride, thus destroying the power of faith.

In Western Europe, and now here at home, that trend is emptying the churches for failure of spiritual leadership. Long priding ourselves on being history's shining example of Augustine's "City in a Hill", the doctrine of the America Dream of prosperity and success bestowed on a faithful people has proven itself to be more alluring than is unbridled trust in the Known but unseen. Most deeply impacted are white Millennials.

### Is the Decline of the Church Good News or Bad?

Derwin Gray sees room for optimism in the decline of the Church in "post-Christian" America, as do I:

*I already see America moving towards becoming a post-Christian nation. Surprisingly, this shift potentially can be great for Jesus' church and his people because when the church is pushed to the margins, she is powerful<sup>2</sup>.*

A 2012 Pew Research Center report offers insight into this changing dynamic<sup>3</sup>. Of the 46M unaffiliated adults in America (the "Nones"), "...two-thirds say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious" (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor".

Churches, then, are viewed by the unaffiliated as social service agencies bonding with the community rather than as forces counter-cultural to community mores. They are perceived not as vibrant communities of faith but as clubs formed for fellowship, good deeds and marginally engrossing entertainment, not unlike most other social service clubs.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Phillips, *China on course to become 'world's most Christian nation' within 15 years*, The Telegraph, 28 March, 2015.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>

<sup>2</sup> Derwin L. Gray, *This Can Happen in America, Part 2*, Christianity Today, 27 March, 2015.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/derwin-gray/2015/march/this-can-happen-in-america-part-2.html>

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, "Nones" on the Rise, 9 October 2012.

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

The Pew report goes on to say that 88% of the unaffiliated are not looking for a church or a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are "...too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics". If the gospel of Jesus Christ is about politics and American exceptionalism, why bother to go to church? Just turn on the news!

### **The Stats are going to Get Worse:**

These stats are going to get worse as the elderly population dies off or, as some would say, goes on to its reward. "A third of adults under 30 have no religious affiliation (32%), compared with just one-in-ten who are 65 and older (9%). And young adults today are much more likely to be unaffiliated than were previous generations at a similar stage in their lives." That should drive a spike into the heart of the church that goes into congregant-attraction mode rather than congregant-renewal mode.

The "Nones", according to Ed Stetzer, tend to be cultural Christians rather than convictional Christians and disproportionately white. For most of these, "...the idea of being Christian and being American are one-in-the-same. But the church defines 'Christian' differently than culture at large, and the distinction is an important one to make"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Time to Make Lemonade:**

Those of us committed to the Church as the ordained engine of transforming faith either have a monumental *problem* or a golden *opportunity*. Gray, a professing born-again Christian, sees it as a golden opportunity:

*As more people feel free to drop the cultural Christian label and more born-again Christians are pushed to the margins of society, the more effective God's people will be. God's people have always been more urgent, faith-filled, and powerful when they are on the margins of society, not at the center. When there is no cost to being a follower of Jesus, the church is historically less powerful.*

Gray offers a peek into what he calls the "Transformational Church".

- We need local churches that are in awe of God...
- We need local churches that depend on the power of God through works of grace we could never do on our own...
- We need local churches to help people develop the characteristics of Christ in their lives...
- We need multiethnic and multiclass local churches...
- We need multigenerational churches...
- We need intellectual church communities that know what they believe and why they believe it in order to become communities of healing and grace...
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### **Agent of Change, or Change of Agent?**

Reality check: It is far easier to hypothesize about the need for the confessing Christian Church in America to change; it is far, far more difficult – in fact, nearly impossible – to make it happen. There are way too many churches out there that caught the church-growth wave of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ed Stetzer, *The State of the Church in America: Hint: It's Not Dying*, [Christianity Today](http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html?paging=off), 1 October, 2013. [www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html?paging=off](http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html?paging=off)

'90's and are coasting on their inertia. There are far too many other churches for whom the church-growth wave was of little interest when it came along because they were fat, spiritually dumb and happy. They now are hanging on by their fingernails in survival mode. Many are and will go under the wrecking ball, to which some may be inclined to say, "Good Riddance!"

**The Columbia Street Project:**

Columbia Street Baptist Church in Bangor, ME, at the margins of the proverbial "graveyard of evangelism", has been given an opportunity to re-ignite. It is in the form of an old Nissen Bakery (creator of the eternal "Twinkie") building next door to the church, purchased from Nissen in the 1960's. Emerging from that building is a non-profit corporation that we have named the Columbia Street Project: *Where Faith Gets Down to Business*, a life-empowering ministry to those who have been on the wrong side of the criminal justice system.

The question with which we now wrestle is whether social justice and the gospel can thrive side-by-side. If they can, new life will be injected into the church because an awesome God will become evident through transformation by faith and hard work. If they cannot, we simply will have engaged in another real estate venture and self-actualization movement not unlike those in any office building on Main St.

Have you started praying yet? We will need it!