

The Challenge Is Clear for Churches

2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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Churches in this country are facing stiff headwinds. According to a Gallup study released in April of this year, the percentage of Americans who report belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque is at an all time low. From the 1930s through the mid 1970s, church membership in this country was 70% or higher. That percentage dropped slightly through the 1990s. During the past twenty years, though, that percentage has dropped precipitously. Last year only 50% claimed membership in a church.

The study divides the population this way. Those born before 1945 are called Traditionalists. Those born between 1946-1964 are Baby Boomers. Those born between 1965-1979 are called Generation X. And those born between 1980-2000 are the Millennials.

Traditionalists, you are doing the best. I'm not surprised. According to the study, 68% of you claim church membership. Baby Boomers, my generation, have fallen off to 57%. Gen X has fallen even further to 54%. Here's the pain. With that youngest group called the Millennials. Their church membership has dropped to 42%.

Here is a summary from the study:

The rate of U.S. church membership has declined sharply in the past two decades after being relatively stable in the six decades before that. A sharp increase in the proportion of the population with no religious affiliation, a decline in church membership among those who do have a religious preference, and low levels of church membership among millennials are all contributing to the accelerating trend.

Then it says this: *The challenge is clear for churches....* (Gallup, April 18, 2019)

It certainly is. So what do we do? Every church pundit has suggestions on how to address this clear challenge. I've said before that I'm not worried one bit about the church as a movement. The movement will not only endure; it will thrive. I am concerned about the church as an institution. The next generation will see major change in the institution of the church. Seminaries will close. Churches will merge or close. And denominational coffers will become lean.

Here is something else we can depend upon. It is be certain, and perhaps it can give us some guidance. The harvest will be plentiful, and the laborers will be few. Therefore, we will need to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. This teaching of Jesus is still relevant and can help us with this unfavorable trend. I want to lift out five things for our consideration.

The first is this: the work of the Kingdom of God is not for the professionals only. Notice Jesus didn't appoint and send just the twelve apostles. My translation says that he appointed and sent seventy; some translations say seventy-two. It is probably a reference to Genesis 10 where a list of nations is given. In the Hebrew text, the number is seventy; in the Greek text, seventy-two. Most believe that this was Luke's way of saying that Jesus sent "a great number" to the nations of the world. The mission of the Kingdom belonged to the people.

We need to bury the notion that the mission of the church belongs to the ordained clergy only. We're Baptist. We believe in the priesthood of every single Believer. The mission of the church belongs to the Believers, the people. Every week we try to make that clear in this church with a statement on the back of the worship guide. I hope you have read it.

Since God's call to salvation is simultaneously a call to mission, every follower of Jesus Christ is a minister. Each member of Weatherly Heights Baptist Church is, therefore, a serving minister. The following persons have been called by this congregation as our equipping ministers....

Then it lists the names of the ordained clergy. That's good theology. Every member of the church is a serving minister. The mission of the church belongs to you. What part of it do you own?

Here's the second thing we must notice: the work of the Kingdom of God has a sense of urgency about it. It was harvest time. The problem wasn't a poor harvest. The harvest was bountiful. The problem was a shortage of workers. Everyone who has a vegetable garden this time of year knows that harvest time comes with a sense of urgency. You better have your workers ready when the harvest is ready, or your harvest will spoil.

Sometimes I can grow discouraged at the state of our country and world. Sometimes it seems that the dark forces have won. Then I remind myself that rather than grow discouraged I should see the urgency of the day. The urgency that we be authentic Christians, rather than Christians for show. That we be formed by the values of Jesus, rather than the values of our culture. That we practice justice, mercy and faith. The world needs that today more than ever.

The third thing: we must trust God. "I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves," Jesus cautioned them. They knew what that meant. The wolf was the natural predator of the lamb. The work of the Kingdom of God could bring personal injury.

It still can, though the threat we face is likely different. We're not likely to be thrown to the lions today or doused in oil and burned as a lantern in the emperor's garden. Our work may be celebrated or vilified, depending upon what we do. The point is trusting God. We do our work in response to the call of God. And if we believe God has called us to a certain work, we must be faithful to it, trusting that God will give us what we need when we need it.

The fourth: we can partner with each other and others in our work. Jesus told them to take no provisions: no purse, no bag, no sandals. He told them to stay in the homes of people who supported their work. Eat the food they ate. Drink what they drank. They were to look for partners in ministry.

We do this with our work at Lincoln Village. We didn't start that work. We don't own it. We partner with others. Some belong to the Church of Christ, some are Baptists, some Presbyterian, and others. We partnered with them to take a run down, drug infested, undesirable community and turn it into decent, affordable housing for families. The same happens in Kentucky. We didn't start that work, and we don't own it. We partner with Mountain Outreach to build decent, affordable housing in rural Appalachia. One team builds the foundation. We frame the house, build the porch, the roof, dry it in. Then another team finishes. Together as partners we do the work of the Kingdom.

One more. The fifth thing we must be sure to notice: expect some rejection. At least sometimes. Jesus told the seventy to be prepared for rejection. When that happened, he told them to wipe the dust from their feet and move to another town.

We should not assume that rejection means we're wrong. It may only mean that we need to do our work somewhere else.

George Barna studies trends in the church. In response to the declining numbers in churches across the country, he recently wrote:

Christianity is not losing influence in America because it is overmatched by the challenges of the day; it is losing impact because believers have been unsuccessful at merging faith and lifestyle outside the walls of the church.

That's where it happens. Outside the walls of the church. That is why Jesus sent the seventy. That is why he sends us. The harvest is still plentiful. I have no doubt about that. And the challenge is clear for churches. I have no doubt about that either. Let us be faithful laborers in the vineyard of God.

Closing Prayer

Lord of the harvest, turn us into laborers in your harvest. Amen.