

Trends

According to a recent survey, the great majority of 'unchurched' people have a church background. Almost two-thirds of them (62%) went to church regularly as a child and one out of three 'unchurched' Americans are actually planning to return to church. Nearly half (47%) would interact freely in a conversation about religion. This means that almost eight of ten 'unchurched' Americans would welcome a gospel conversation. Among the 'unchurched,' 55% said they would attend church if invited by a family member. And 51% said they would attend church if invited by a friend or neighbor.

—via LifeWay Research

Revelation 22:17: "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

Sermons

"The violence in the Bible is appalling." —Christopher Hitchens

"There's no better book with which to defend the Bible than the Bible itself." —Dwight L. Moody

2 Peter 3:16: "...they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction."

News & Notes

Please pray for those mentioned in the announcements after services and others listed on the bulletin board in the foyer of the church building.

Pray for all the members at Westside! Please pray for Susan Ferrell and her family as she continues to recover from a brain tumor. Please pray for her and her family.

Please pray for Alan Jones. He underwent deep brain stimulation to hopefully relieve severe facial pain. Alan held a gospel meeting for us in October 2014. He's been unable to preach for several months due to his affliction. Pray for him and his family.

Please pray for sister Virginia Brown's upcoming hip replacement surgery (2/15/17).

Pray for the all of our students. Schools are back in session and bring many temptations to our young people.

Please keep sister Wilma in your prayers! She gives all of us so much encouragement! God bless her and Virginia! Remember both of them in your prayers.

There are many needy saints! Can you help? Let me know.

If you know of any in need of our prayers please let us know!

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Words of Life

Westside
church of Christ

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

John 6:68



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Cafeteria-Style Religion

Ethan R. Longhenry

Choice is one of the most highly prized values of many Americans. We feel confined and perhaps even oppressed if we believe our choices are about to be restricted even though we are often overwhelmed by the number of choices available to us for everything from toothpaste to restaurants. Therefore it should not be surprising that Americans feel very strongly about choice in terms of religious ideas, beliefs, and practices.

American religion, while always being a melting-pot of diverse faiths, has lost much of its definition. As with other aspects of society, religion has been thoroughly democratized. Loyalties to specific religious denominations or groups has dissolved. These days people choose whether to believe and then what to believe. Few boundaries prove too difficult to overcome for Americans; they will often pick and choose beliefs from a kaleidoscope of various faith traditions. In short, Americans seem to value cafeteria-style religion.

Cafeteria-style religion is an understandable result of the core values of American society. Americans believe that it is best for everyone to believe as they wish without governmental interference. Americans also have come to not just value tolerance of different belief systems but also relativism: no one has a monopoly on truth, different truths can be found in different religions, and the truth of each individual is his or her own truth and need not be the truth of any other. Furthermore, Christianity is considered "old-fashioned" and "traditional" while Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are different, "new" to us, and therefore more "exciting." And since Americans have always been skeptical of authority figures, the idea of a God who dictates what is right and wrong absolutely is a challenge, and it is easier to explore one's own spirituality. It is no wonder, therefore, that so many create their own religion out of different pieces from major belief systems!

There is one commendable aspect to all of this, and that is how people are willing to investigate religious claims. Such investigation is good and profitable (cf. Acts 17:10-11, 27). But that investigation is to have a goal: the discovery of truth, not just constant investigation (2 Tim. 3:7)!

The Bible teaches that the message of Christianity is to go out to all peoples

and they are to decide for themselves whether they will serve God or will reject Him (Matt. 28:18-20, Acts 13:45-46). God will bring everyone into judgment for this decision (Rom. 2:5-10), but Christians should not compel anyone to believe by force. While there is no compulsion, we must also declare that Christianity cannot properly be cut up into different pieces, accepting some and rejecting others, while accepting other aspects of different religions. Cafeteria-style religion may be popular among Americans, but the New Testament indicates that we do not decide what is right and wrong, but live according to God's standard of right and wrong. Jesus declared the following regarding Himself: *"Jesus saith unto him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me.'"* (Jn. 14:6).

This is an exclusive claim that demands full acceptance or rejection. We are not given an opportunity to vacillate or attempt to sit on the fence; either Jesus is the truth or He is a lie. There is no middle ground; we must either accept or reject Jesus as the Christ, the Lord, the Son of God.

Many hear such a statement and believe it overly arrogant. Yet, if we understand what Jesus is saying in context, it is not arrogant at all. Jesus is showing His disciples that if they have seen His great deeds and wonderful teachings, they have seen the Father in Him (cf. Jn. 14:7-12). Jesus claimed to be God in human form, the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:1, 14, 8:58). God the Son has fully declared God the Father in word and deed (Jn. 1:18). If this is true, then Jesus' claim is natural, understandable, and worthy of acceptance: since God is the Creator and has established His rules for the creation, if Jesus has completely manifested the way of God and is God, He is the embodiment of truth and life, and His life shows us the way!

This means that Jesus and His written revelation is our standard. Is it true that we will discover some truths in other religions? Absolutely! But those elements are not true because they are part of those religions, but because they are in alignment with the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3-11, 2 Tim. 3:16-17). If we understand that Jesus of Nazareth is a most compelling figure, and worthy of imitation, then we cannot participate in "cafeteria-style religion." Instead, we must follow the path of Jesus wherever it leads (1 Jn. 2:6).

The past few decades have seen the flowering of the belief that most churches are the same regardless of their denominational heritage, and so Christians should be able to "shop" around for churches to find the best "product" to suit their needs. For far too many "churches," the assemblies are more like shows or entertainment than they are times for Christians to come together to strengthen one another. God has commanded Christians to assemble with one another to build each other up and to partake of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7, Heb. 10:24-25), and to work together in local assemblies to build up the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27, Eph. 4:11-16). Too many have the mindset that their Christianity or that Christianity itself is based in its assemblies, when in reality, assemblies represent the time of strengthening necessary to live the Christian life (1 Cor. 14:26, Heb. 10:24-25). Christianity involves individual believers being conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), of which assembling with fellow believers is a part. Participation in the body of Christ and a local church demands agreement on what God has revealed as true in Jesus Christ and to work and serve together in community (1 Cor. 1:10, 12:12-28, Phil. 2:1-4); we will not be able to glorify

God if we maintain a consumer mentality about His church.

Cafeteria-style religion may be fashionable but there is no indication that it will save anyone in the wrath to come. Instead, we encourage you to seek after New Testament Christianity, looking to Jesus who is the truth and working with other believers who do the same (1 Jn. 1:5-2:6). Let us learn truth from Jesus, for our own ways cannot save (Jer. 10:23)!

Where Do We Find New Converts?

Greg Gwin

A recent survey of several churches of Christ turned up some interesting statistics about the people who are being converted to Christ (see previous article).

Some things didn't seem to matter much. For instance, there were about equal numbers of men and women who became Christians. And people from different races were represented in percentages that aren't far different than the general population.

The age of new converts showed an interesting trend. The highest percentages were among men and women from 20 to 40 years old. And among these, the highest numbers were for married people. This should tell us that we ought to be especially targeting young married people with the gospel message.

The second largest age group for converts was for those under 20 years old. Most of these were children of existing members. This is an extremely important group, and we should never fail to pay special attention to the conversion of our 'own' children.

Without a doubt, the most strikingly obvious statistic is that new converts are, by far, most often among people who are friends or relatives of those who are already Christians. In fact, a look at the numbers shows that fully 80% of conversions are among those that we already know. Only 4% were reached by advertising efforts, and just 1% contacted by door-to-door work.

What does this tell us? It's clear that we need to be working hard to teach and convert our own family members, our friends and co-workers, our neighbors and other acquaintances. Four out of every five conversions are likely to come from these folks who are already known to us. And yet we continue to target people we don't know with ads and door knocking. Let's change that. Let's get more efficient. Let's work energetically to teach and convert as many as we can—especially those we already know.

"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?"

1 John 3:17