



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on April 19, 2019

Gallup: Church Membership Down 20 Percent in 20 Years

Recent Gallup polls appear to reflect and confirm the “secularization thesis” in the United States: Church membership and religious affiliation among all demographics is falling precipitously. [On Thursday Gallup reported](#) that since 2000, church membership in the United States has fallen, modestly at first but accelerating recently. Twenty years ago, 70 percent of Americans said they were members of a church or a synagogue. Today, said Gallup, that has declined by 20 points to just 50 percent. Said Gallup: “The decline in church membership is consistent with larger societal trends in declining church attendance and an increasing proportion of Americans with no religious preference.”



The decline among Millennials (born 1980-2000) was equally drastic. Twenty years ago, 62 percent of Generation Xers belonged to a church, while among Millennials today just 42 percent say they belong to a church.

Gallup concluded, based on this poll, that the “United States is far less religious that it used to be,” adding, “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.”

Gallup reached the same conclusion following another study it recently released as part of its ongoing analysis of religion in America. When asked, “How important would you say religion is in your own life — very important, fairly important or not very important? — the cohort Gallup quizzed showed a drop from 58 percent saying religion was “very important” in 2012 to 50 percent in 2018.

When that same cohort was asked, “Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days, or not?” 32 percent of them said Yes, down from 42 percent in 2009. Even more concerning was the number who answered Never. In 1998, just 10 percent said they never attend church. By 2018, that number had jumped nearly threefold, to 28 percent.

Nancy Ammerman, professor of the sociology of religion at Boston University, said the religious base of the American Republic is eroding: “Culturally we are seeing significant erosion in the trust people have for institutions in general and churches in particular. We are also seeing a generational shift as the “joiner” older generation dies off and a generation of non-joiners comes on the scene.”

Professor Scott Thumma, who teaches the same thing at Hartford Seminary, blamed the decline on young people delaying marriage and thus postponing starting a family.



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On the other hand, Glenn Stanton, the director of family formation studies at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, says these polls prove no such thing; that on the contrary, the church of “real believers” has never been stronger:

Religious faith in America is going the way of the Yellow Pages and travel maps, we keep hearing. It’s just a matter of time until Christianity’s total and happy extinction, chortle our cultural elites. Is this true? Is churchgoing and religious adherence really in “widespread decline” so much so that conservative believers should suffer “growing anxiety”?

Two words: *Absolutely not.*

Stanton says it’s a matter of asking the right question, citing a study published in *Sociological Science* by two professors, one from Indiana University and the other from Harvard. Wrote Stanton: “It comes down primarily to what kind of faith one is talking about. Not the belief system itself, per se, but the intensity and seriousness with which people hold and practice that faith.” The study, said Stanton, shows that

The percentage of Americans who attend church more than once a week, pray daily, and accept the Bible as wholly reliable and deeply instructive to their lives has remained absolutely, steel-bar constant for the last 50 years or more, right up to today....

The percentage of such people is ... not small. One in three Americans prays multiple times a day....

One-third of Americans hold that the Bible is the actual word of God....

Those who take their faith seriously are becoming a markedly larger proportion of all religious people. In 1989, 39 percent of those who belong to a religion held strong beliefs and practices. Today, these are 47 percent of all the religiously affiliated.

Those two professors, Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, summed up their study:

Recent research argues that the United States is secularizing, that this religious change is consistent with the secularization thesis, and that American religion is not exceptional.

But we show that 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.

We also show that in comparable countries, intense religion is on the decline or already at very low levels. Therefore, the intensity of American religion is actually becoming more exceptional over time. We conclude that intense religion in the United States is persistent and exceptional in ways that do not fit the secularization thesis.

Stanton quoted another study done by professors at the Baylor Institute for Studies in Religion who found that the percentage of church-going Americans, compared to the nation’s population, is more than four times greater today than it was in 1776, and “the number of attendees has continued to rise each and every decade over our nation’s history right up until the present day.”

The remaining question is this: What constitutes that “intensity of American religion” that makes it unique? In attempting to answer, J. I. Packer, in his monumental work *Knowing God*, said, “First, one can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him. Second, one can know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God.” He contrasts two individuals attending a July 4 parade: One is a bystander, enjoying the passing throng of bands, performers, and bagpipers; the other



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is actually participating in the parade itself, carrying and playing his instrument.

Charles Spurgeon, the “prince of preachers,” in a sermon he gave in December 1870, spoke of his own personal testimony of his acceptance of the Gospel of Christ:

So to believe in our Lord means this: that I believe Him to be the Son of God, and believe all other truths concerning Him; that I also believe whatever He says to be the truth. In other words, I believe Him.

Yet more than this, I cast my soul upon His atoning merits that He may save it, and so believe upon Him, and furthermore, having so done I give myself up entirely to the Savior’s holy guidance.

I believe Him to be infallible as the director of my spirit. I feel a union with Him. I come to be in Him. His cause is my cause. My cause His cause — I believe into Him.

Stanton was interviewed by Jerry Newcombe for D. James Kennedy Ministries recently, and said that the declines were occurring in churches that had abandoned the Gospel: “They are bailing on the basics of Christianity and, guess what?, the people are bailing on them. People are leaving those churches as if the buildings are on fire, and do you know where they are going? They are not going nowhere. They are going to the Biblically faithful churches, and those are the churches that are growing.”

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