

# The Cost Of Being A Christian

Mainline Liberal Protestant denominations such as Episcopalian, Unitarian, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches have been losing members since the 1960s. In the past 30 years, these groups have lost between 1/5 and 1/3 of their total membership. Declines have been especially steep among younger members.

Why has this happened? Several factors can be cited: (1) Liberal religions have watered down the moral requirements of the gospel. Having abandoned biblical morality, these groups have followed a policy of permissiveness: supporting abortion rights, homosexual rights, lower standards of personal conduct, etc.; (2) Liberal religions manifest an obsession with politics. If you were handed a hundred public declarations by liberal clergymen and a hundred newspaper editorials from the New York Times, you would be hard pressed to distinguish one from the other. The problems of crime, homelessness, human rights, animal rights, multiculturalism, etc., have replaced sermons on virtue, sin and salvation; and, (3) Liberal religions focus on the social rather than the spiritual. When a liberal church ceases to be a body concerned with the proclamation of the truth of God's word, it can continue to function for a while as a social institution. Yet, this appeal cannot last for long. But in our busy age, many do not have time just to schmooze. For that, young people can go to the gym, and thereby accomplish two objectives at once.

Two sociologists, Roger Finke and Rodney Starke, authors of *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, have proposed an interesting theory about church growth. They argue that, in the religious marketplace, churches grow in direct relationship to the demands they place on their membership. For example, if a church requires high standards of faith and action, they grow. If a church eases those demands, they lose adherents.

For the sake of illustration compare real art to knock-off art. In other words, what is the difference between viewing an original painting by Rembrandt and buying an "Elvis on Black Velvet" picture at the flea market for \$20? It takes training and education to appreciate real art. Once the training is complete, the payoff is enormous, at least in the form of aesthetic experience. Knock-off art is art on the cheap. It makes it easy for us. By taking the form of real art and using techniques of its own, it seeks to provide stimulation of aesthetic experience right off the bat. Yet, the experience is empty and barren.

Roughly speaking, liberal religion is like knock-off art. It lowers its standards. Traditionally, a religious system is centered around an "orthodox" set of beliefs. The believers are expected to subscribe to those beliefs, and follow a definite standard of conduct. According to the Bible, genuine religion seeks to reflect, not the world, but rather the truth! Knock-off religions reflect only the world: its current politically correct interests, its focus on the state rather than the individual, its desire to be free of troublesome moral obligations, etc. Historically, churches have been the only organizations whose mission is to seek out and disseminate truth. Tragically, many

religious groups no longer believe in the concept of truth. Having rejected the authority of God's word, everything becomes relative. Liberal Protestantism of today is characterized by a no-demands, no-standards, no-requirements, no-guilt approach toward God. It offers a feel-good religion of sloppy sentimentality. Knock-off religion makes an end run around truth, providing a feeling of "spirituality" without the requirement of adhering to any Biblical standard. This approach is doomed from the start!

Thus, we are witnessing the decline of mainline Protestant denominationalism. From a strict marketing standpoint, this strategy cannot work for long. It is a problem of redundancy. There are many non-religious institutions in modern life that are ready and willing to offer the same benefits as liberal religion. The New Age movement promises the feeling of "spirituality" without God. Do you want to make friends? Go to the gym. A whole range of social-political organizations provide the intoxicating feeling of self-righteousness without having to sit through an hour-long service. Hillary Rodham Clinton's "Politics Of Meaning" falls into this last category. By seeking to be relevant, liberal churches have made themselves irrelevant.

Liberal denominations try to do religion on the cheap. Lukewarm disciples also try to follow the gospel on the cheap. Both are doomed to failure. True religion has strict demands. David realized the cost of true religion when he said, "I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24). Jesus described the sweeping demands of faith when He said, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:28-31). Let us consider the high costs of being a Christian.

### **Emotional**

Being a Christian demands emotional involvement. We must love God. Yet, this love does not exist in a vacuum. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). A recognition of the greatness of God's love causes us to live for Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). The love of God is perfected in our lives through obedience (1 John 2:3-5).

We must also love our brethren. This love must be deep enough that we truly share their joys and sorrows (Romans 12:15-16). Paul was no unattached mercenary; he felt a deep attachment to his countrymen (Romans 9:1-3) and his brethren (2 Corinthians 12:15). His highest desire was their salvation. We must share this disposition!

### **Intellectual**

Being a Christian demands intellectual involvement. Knowledge of the truth is vitally important. It enables us to discern the best course along life's pathway (Philippians 1:9-11). It empowers us to walk worthy of the Lord (Colossians 1:9-10). Therefore, we should diligently study God's word (2 Timothy 2:15).

## **Physical**

Being a Christian demands physical involvement. Paul made great physical sacrifices for the cause of Christ (Act 20:18-21, 27). He proved himself as an apostle through facing and overcoming so much adversity (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). We also must understand that our faith is not measured in words but deeds (1 John 3:17-18).

## **Financial**

Being a Christian demands financial involvement. The poor widow who cast two mites into the treasure is an enduring example of this truth (Mark 12:41-44). So also are the churches of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). God demands that we give cheerfully, freely, and generously in supporting the cause of Christ (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

## **Chronological**

Being a Christian demands chronological involvement. Time is limited. Jesus emphasized this truth when He said, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4). Seize those fleeting moments of opportunity before they are eternally lost (Galatians 6:10). Redeem the time (Ephesians 5:15-16)!

As you can see, the costs of being a Christian are many and varied. True religion demands our all! God will accept nothing less than full and unconditional surrender to his cause! The Laodiceans show the folly of a half-hearted approach to serving God (Revelation 3:14-17). Instead, let us follow the noble example of Epaphroditus who was faithful in service and obedience (Philippians 2:25-30).

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