

The Coming Great Returning (Part 1)

“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Reflection 1 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

This week we begin a new series of reflections in our newsletter entitled “A New World in the Morning.” It’s a series I’m excited about and have been thinking about for quite a while now. But it rises out of what seems to be something very troubling – that church attendance is declining in America largely across the board, in all religious affiliations but especially among the twentysomethings. And so we begin with the bad news first – the incredibly shrinking church of America. More and more when people state their religious affiliation they are choosing “None – none of the above.” Fifty years ago, almost no one was doing this. These days, depending on the poll you follow, 16-20% of Americans claim no religious affiliation. What’s a great deal more telling is that of those under 30, 25-30% are “none of the above.”

Having said this, about as many people in America claim to go to church as ever. Over the past fifty years self-reported church attendance in America has stayed in mid-40s, that is, for fifty years now a fairly constant 40some percent claim to attend church regularly. That number is fairly constant, slipping only a little lately, and this would be good except for this: A lot of these people aren’t telling the truth. Well, maybe they think they go to church regularly. Regular church attendance means something different today than it did say, even, twenty years ago. It used to mean going to church three or more weekends a month – even several times a week. Now people who show up once every four to six weeks see themselves as regular churchgoers. So when researchers look at attendance more closely, they variously conclude that only 16-22% of Americans actually go to church on any given Sunday. America prides itself on being a religious country, specifically a Christian country, but one researcher observes that the only thing exceptional about American religion is its consistent failure to report its own behavior accurately.¹

Whatever is true of the decline of religious attendance in general is even more true of the those in their twenties. In fact, most evangelical loss stems from the loss of young people who see the church as judgmental, hypocritical, antigay, out of touch, politicized, exclusive and boring. So it is with these concerns that we start our reflections.

And we begin with an odd little text in the Gospel of Luke, in Luke 18:1-8, a parable Jesus told his disciples to show them that they should always pray and not give up. It’s a simple parable and pretty much explains itself. “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him night and day? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.’”

And we may struggle to get past the comparison of God to the uncaring judge, but of course that is the point. If even an unjust judge who doesn't fear God and doesn't care about people, an unjust judge with no moral fiber, no human compassion, no real concern for anyone but himself, finally gives in to the widow who keeps nagging him, then how much more confident can we be that our God who hears and cares and loves us will see that the right thing is done?

But then, in the last part of verse 8, comes the zinger! "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" God will be doing just fine, doing what God always does, but will there be anyone pleading with God? And that question has haunted people down through the ages as time after time the church has faced struggle, setback, waves of barbarians, masses of the indifferent, storms of doubt and skepticism, sometimes persecution, more often losing its own way and its own message.

And now we have come to such a time again. "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Which leads us to the question: Why? Why this historic decline in church attendance in America?

We could cite a lot of things maybe beginning with the fact that the first decade of this century was hard on religion. With 9/11 we saw the true face of religious fanaticism. The Catholic Church seemed mired down in sexual abuse though the problem is not exclusively Catholic. The Protestant debate over homosexuality turned ugly. And Christianity came to be identified in the minds of many with the Religious Right.

Or maybe (and conversely) it's because we have so many Christian resources at our finger tips. We can watch video sermons. We can catch podcasts of great Bible teachers. We can listen to live worship online. We can carry the Bible and entire collections of Bible software on our smart phones. And if we're feeling sociable (or even if we're not) we can connect to hundreds of Christian friends on Facebook or Twitter. So who, some suppose, needs church?

But even more fundamentally Christianity has a major branding problem. More and more people, churchgoers even, are anxious about identifying themselves as Christian; many are quick to protest, "But our church is not like that!" I know that feeling! Been there, done that. Fewer and fewer find believable dogmatic answers about matters that they know are ultimately infinite and mysterious. In fact, what people seek these days is more belief and fewer beliefs, more fundamental trust in God and fewer esoteric doctrines. And here's the bottom line. Many now weigh churches against the original teachings of Jesus and their own experiences, and find many churches wanting. Many, many people seek compassion, decency, common sense and inclusiveness but have not found this in the churches, mosques and synagogues of their experience. They still believe in God but they struggle to find God in organized religion.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.

ⁱ Philip S. Brenner, cited in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 53.