



HOW TO PROTECT A CONGREGATION FROM DYING!

Introduction:

A. The Religious Makeup Of American Has Certainly Changed In The Last Millennium.

1. Sixty years ago, most people had some affiliation with a church.
2. Most churches were Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Or Non-Denominational (Like The Churches Of Christ!)
3. There were splinters of thought among these individual groups; they were not all united.
4. In the last half-century, as the internet and information has become so available at everyone's fingertips, many world religions have become part of the American landscape; Eastern religious thinking has had impact in New Age thinking; and Postmodern thought has convinced many that man can worship as HE SEES FIT, that truth is determined by every person's own thoughts.
5. Too, there has been a revolt against Catholicism and many "Mainline" denominations.
 - a. Many young people have walked out the doors in rejection of what they have been taught.
 - b. Many are bitter and angry!
6. Some religious doomsday writers are claiming that American Christianity is dying!

B. Here Is The Question: "How Can We Protect Our Congregations From Dying?"

I. (Slide #2) Many Religious Writers Are Affirming That "American Christianity Is Dying."

A. (►) **"American Christianity Is Dying."** -- A Recent Article by Richard Brand in the Huffington Post, 11-12-16; Brand Is A Presbyterian Preacher Who Retired After 40 Years Of Preaching.

1. He affirms that Christian faith in the United States is in the process of “change and decay.”
 - a. This is a pun from the words of the song “Abide With Me!”
 - b. Denominations are continuing to lose members.
 - c. “Death and desertion are taking their toll.”
 - d. The average age of members of denominations is over 50.
 - e. There is an ever increasing number of “Nones” in younger people.
 - f. “Lots of young families just have other things they are doing on Sunday.”

2. He asserts that those who seem to still have some vitality are what he calls “evangelical religious right.”
 - a. Who does he identify as the “evangelical religious right”?
 1. Those who proclaim a “prosperity Gospel” -- serve God and get rich!
 2. Those who teach a version of righteousness that wants to dictate morality to the rest of the world that seems to be appealing to some.”
 - a. He identifies these people as those who have “a meanness in their faith.”
 - b. There is a lack of inclusiveness in that faith.
 - c. They don’t want a mosque close to their building.
 - d. “They would refuse to allow certain biological types to join in marriage” (men with men and women with women.)
 - e. They want to prevent a woman from having the power to choose.

3. He then makes an interesting statement: “The really sad thing is that the Christian faith of the first century was admired and flocked to because of its compassion and love and inclusiveness. Gentiles and Jews were welcomed. The public opinion was that Christians were unique by the way they loved each other and people. The early church was made up of the poor and the despised. They had great power of faith and love because they did not have political or economic power. In the midst of a very diverse and multi-religious environment, the early Christian believers were much more attractive.”

4. Interesting comments to his article:
 - a. Some are caustic attacks on American religion -- they see it as a cancer to society and mankind; they see organized religion as men exerting power and control over congregants.
 - b. Some are disgusted by watered-down messages:
 - c. Some are angry at what they see as attempts to combine religious values and religion in politics:
 - d. Some see religions compromising with culture and adapting to culture.
 - e. Some are reacting to hypocrisy they have seen!

B. (►) **The Rise Of The “Nones”!**

1. What Are You Talking About?????
2. They are those who check that they have NO religious affiliation; however, they are not atheists or agnostics.
3. They are one of the fastest growing groups in the U.S. according to religious surveys.
 - a. These surveys reflect “a historic shift in the landscape of American religious life. Americans, especially young Americans, are much less likely to identify with traditional categories of affiliation like Protestant or Catholic. But the loss of religious identity does not necessarily mean the end of spirituality, as two thirds of the nones continue to profess belief in God and many of them express some kind of spiritual or religious interest.”
 - b. www.ministrymatters.com quotes figures from a 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life and the PBS program Religion & Ethics News Weekly says, “Their numbers have been growing. When asked to claim a religious affiliation, the number of Americans who say “none” has risen steadily in the last five years. They now represent about one in five of all Americans and one in three of all adults under thirty.”
 - c. <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/19/event-transcript-religion-trends-in-the-u-s/> Pew Forum cites a Gallup poll that says that in 2008, 14.6% were nones; in 2012 that rate had gone up to 17.8% are nones. And the Pew Forum report suggests that that number is above 19% now.
4. Practices by the “nones.”
 - a. 72% say they seldom or never attend religious services.
 - b. Yet, over half, 55%, describe themselves as either religious or as spiritual but not religious.
 - c. Over 2/3 of them believe religious institutions are too concerned with money, rules, and politics.
 - d. Only 5% attend worship services on a weekly basis.
5. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-laderman/the-rise-of-religious-non_b_2913000.html “the rise of the ‘nones’ surely suggests it is the end of religion as we know it. Forget churches; forget priests and pastors; forget the Bible; forget organized religion generally. What is sacred are no longer conventional objects like a cross, a singular religious identity like being a Methodist, nor activities like going to church or prayer. Instead, the religious worlds in the contemporary and future United States are robust and capacious, providing an abundance of spiritual possibilities found in unexpected places like drum circles and meditation exercises, sports events and other expressions from popular culture. It is a brave new world for religious Americans who are increasingly unhinged from traditional authorities and institutions.” 03/20/2013

C. (►) **Many Profess To Be Religious; However, They Are Very Open To All Kinds Of “Christian” Religions And To Non-Christian Religions.**

1. They may hold to some “Christian” teachings; they may also hold to anti-Christian or unchristian concepts at the same time!
2. Syncretists -- they take parts of completely different religions and amalgamate them into their own religious system!
3. From *You Lost Me* by David Kinnaman, p. 93 This generation “have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance. Thus, Christianity’s claims to exclusivity are a hard sell. They want to find areas of common ground, even if that means glossing over real differences.”
4. They have been greatly influenced by postmodern thinking.
 - a. They have some core values.
 - b. Most do not have very strong convictions!
 - c. They value their personal ideas as much as the Word of God!!
5. They don’t think you have to go to church to please God -- just have your own faith!
6. Many believe there’s a god -- they don’t know who that is. They have their own “god” ideas.

II. (Slide #3) **True Christianity Is Not Dying!**

A. **Jesus Established His Church As An Eternal Institution!**

1. NOTHING was going to keep Him from building It!
 - a. The opposition of unbelievers could not stop Him!
 - b. His murder could not stop Him!
 1. Mt. 16:18 “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”
 2. He was going to rise, live, and ascend.
 3. His Church would be established!
2. Dn. 2:44 “And in the days of these kings **the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed**; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and **it shall stand forever.**”
3. Dn. 7:14 “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. **His dominion is an everlasting dominion**, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom *the one* Which shall not be destroyed.”

B. Counterfeits Will Fail!

1. Denominations based upon human creeds began on the wrong foundation!
2. They constantly change to fit the thinking of culture.
3. Many seek to please the people; however, people constantly change; those who please people in one decade may totally lose them in the next decade!

C. Christianity May Face Awful Opposition!

1. It did at the end of the First Century.
2. Persecution And Martyrdom were SO severe that some of God's people thought the Church would be wiped off the map!
3. Martyred Christians are depicted in the Revelation apocalypse believing that the Church was going to cease to exist: "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" Rev. 6:10
4. Not even Nero or Domitian could destroy Christianity in the First Century; And No Opponent Or Organized Opposition Today Will Destroy The Church.

III. (Slide #4) How Can We Protect A Congregation From Dying?

- A. Realize That Congregations Can Die If We Are Not Aware And If We Do Not Act!

B. (Slide #5) Congregations Must Be Dynamic And Active!

1. The church at Antioch in the book of Acts should be a model to every congregation!
2. They taught the lost; they strengthen the faith of the members; they were concerned about missions; they were concerned about protecting their members!

C. (►) Congregations Must Proclaim The TRUE Nature Of Faith.

1. Most "nones" think that Christianity is pure speculation and fantasy! They have no concept of knowledge and faith as depicted in Scripture.
2. They have been taught that the ONLY kind of knowledge is "Empirical Knowledge." Therefore, because they do not see God, there is NO certainty that a God exists.

3. They see science and religion as enemies -- they see empirical knowledge and faith as diametrically opposite concepts!
4. We must teach them that evidentiary knowledge and fiduciary knowledge are concrete and trustworthy.
 - a. Evidentiary knowledge:
 1. Ps. 19:1-6
 2. Ac. 14:17
 3. Rom. 1:19,20 "because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,"
 - a. And, look at the consequences of being a "none."
 - b. Their thinking becomes pitiful -- become FUTILE in thinking; foolish heart is darkened. 21
 - c. They become fools even though they are sure they are wise! 22
 - d. Begin to worship the creature more than the Creator. 23,25
 - e. Lusts rule their lives; sin reigns and there are no limitations on how far they will go into vile degradation and depravity! 26-32
 - b. Fiduciary knowledge:
 1. The trustworthy God gives us trustworthy information.
 2. Heb. 11:3
 3. Tit. 1:2 "God, who cannot lie."
4. Show them that Christianity is NOT based upon speculation! There are so many empirical and fiduciary evidences to show the reliability of Christianity!
5. Bible faith is built upon the empirical evidences that are all around us and upon the trustworthiness of the God.
6. A person does not have to divest himself of his intellect to understand Christianity; in fact, Christianity is a religion of intelligence and heart!
7. Oh how different this is than the shallow concept most "nones" have about faith.
8. I have been AMAZED at how this teaching changes people's minds.

D. (►) Congregations MUST Exalt The TRUE God!

1. Ac. 14:8-19 To the idolaters at Lystra who tried to worship Paul and Barnabas after they healed the lame man, they pointed them to the TRUE God!
2. They pointed them to the living God, the Creator and His Creation! Ac. 14:15 and to the order and design of the Creation! Ac. 14:17 “Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.”
3. Ac. 17:15-32 To the Athenian idolaters, Paul proclaimed the “Unknown God!”
 - a. He preached unto them “the LIVING God!” The Creator, the All-Sovereign God, the Living God -- a spirit of whom we are His offspring; and the Judge of all mankind by His Son, Jesus Christ!
 - b. He preached unto them the resurrected Jesus! 18

E. (►) Congregations Must Proclaim Jesus!

1. The Israelite girl who had been taken captive by the Syrians and served Naaman’s wife had compassion for Naaman’s leprosy.
 - a. II Ki. 5:3 “Then she said to her mistress, ‘If only my master *were* with the prophet who *is* in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy.’”
 - b. She wanted Naaman to come in contact with the power of God that could heal him of his dreaded disease!
2. Paul and Silas to the jailor in Philippi.
 - a. I know nothing that suggests that the jailor at Philippi was a religious man.
 - b. Ac. 16:30-33 “And he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ ³¹So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³And he took them the same hour of the night and washed *their* stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.”
3. Guide them to have an encounter with Jesus -- to know who He is and to see what His Will them is!
 - a. Member of the Godhead!
 - b. Creator of the universe!
 - c. I have found that these truths make a HUGE impact on anyone who seriously considers these facts!
4. He is THE EXCLUSIVE Savior! Jn. 14:6

F. (Slide #6) Congregations Must Emphasize The Holy Spirit And His Precious, Perfect Gift To Man -- The Inspired Word Of God!

1. He is a member of the Godhead! Mt. 28:19; I Jn. 5:7
2. Talk about His work of revelation and inspiration -- II Tim. 3:16,17 “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

G. (►) Congregations Must Be Unashamedly Loyal To The Truth!

1. Jn. 14:6 “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’”
2. Jn. 8:32 “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”
3. Jn. 12:48 “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him--the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.”
4. Congregations have a mission -- to be THE base of Truth in a community! I Tim. 3:14,15 “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; ¹⁵but if I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”
5. Paul’s warning to the elders of Ephesus: Ac. 20:27-32 “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. ³²So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

H. (►) Congregations Must Be Constantly Evangelistic!

1. Congregations are in a constant state of flux.
2. People age; people die; people move; young people grow up and go off to college; some leave the faith.
3. Inactive congregations are headed toward non-existence!

4. Congregations lose people from the flux; to offset that they must continually be reaching more people!

I. (Slide #7) Congregations Must Always Be Focused Upon Growing Leadership!

1. Leaders rise; leaders serve; leaders become unable to serve; leaders die!
2. Congregations must be devoted to continually growing men and encouraging them to step into leadership roles.
3. Our new leaders at Washington Avenue are to be commended for their zeal and for the optimism they have brought to the work here!

J. (►) Members Must Be Expected To Love Each Other And To Exhibit Peace!

1. Fussing, fighting, and discord are absolute turnoffs to those who are not Christians. They realize that those who act that way are no better than the world!
2. Hear Jesus: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jn. 13:34,35
3. I Jn. 4:9-11 “In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

K. (►) All Members Must Be Challenged To Live A Life Of Genuine Faith.

1. People need to see our conviction, passion, and sacrifice for the Lord!
2. We must be ABSOLUTELY GENUINE!!!!
 - a. What may surprise you -- people are looking for something GENUINE!!!!
 - b. Hypocrisy is an absolute turnoff to them!
 - c. We must exhibit a dedication to Truth, to morality, and to godly living!

L. (►) Pray For Your Congregation's Present And Future!

1. True concern will motivate us to pray for what we truly love!
2. Praying will motivate our hearts to work for what we have prayed!
3. My prayer is that Washington Avenue will be a dynamic, active, loyal congregation of the Lord this year, next year, in the coming decade, in the coming generation, and for generations to come!

(Slide #8) Conclusion:

- A. Let's Make It A Vibrant Congregation That Loves Jesus!
- B. Let's Protect Our Congregation From Dying!
- C. May Washington Avenue Glorify The Godhead And Promote The Gospel For Generations To Come In Evansville And Throughout The World Long After Many Of Us Are Dead And In Eternity!