

## Lesson 7

# Complacency Within & Indifference Without

## *Combating stagnation inside the local church*

### Introduction

It is interesting to look back over the history of the churches of Christ in the United States and see the tremendous growth of our congregations in the years following World War 2. For around twenty years (well into the mid-1960's) local churches were filled to capacity -- bible studies, preaching meetings, and public outreach abounded -- and the response was tremendous growth. Inside the major cities, local churches grew and decided to help new congregations get started in the suburbs. Things looked optimistic.

Then the culture changed as a new generation arose.

As the 70's began, a younger and more sophisticated generation began to question everything. Long held standards of morality were rejected wholesale. It became popular to *question authority*. The rebellion against the modernism of the baby boomer generation and those before it was in vogue. The fast growth that characterized the congregations of the 1950's and early 1960's' diminished. And from then to the end of the century -- many congregations found themselves in denial of the new reality. The growth and vitality they once enjoyed had morphed into stagnation and decline.

Now well into the 2020's, many congregations in the churches of Christ are in serious decline. The average age in many places is well over 50 and the number of children and young families in the majority of congregations is a vital concern. In some congregations there are only 1 or 2 adults

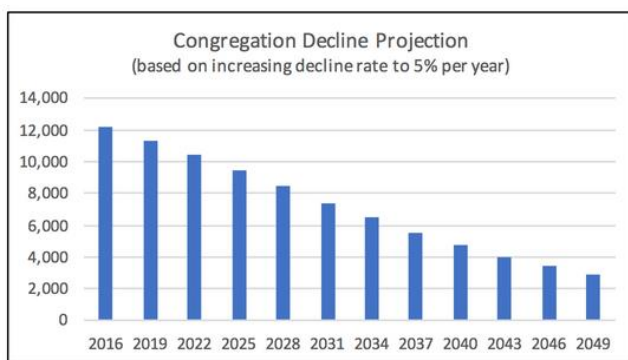


Table 3: Projected congregational decline rate assuming closings increase to 5% annually by 2034.

between the ages of 18-30. Many church buildings have parts of or all of their Bible class wing shutdown due to lack of use. The number of congregations closing that once numbered in the hundreds... and having worldwide impact on missions, etc., is shocking. The statistics are eye-opening. One projection forecasts congregational decline rates to increase to 5% annually by 2034. The same study projects similar declines in church membership as well.

There are many factors in play here. We could cite a hostile culture that is growing in its rejection and suspicion of Christianity. We could also consider the growing secularization of society - where religious beliefs and practices have become less central to daily life. This has been influenced by scientific advancements, rationalism, and a

focus on individualism. Changes in social mores around issues like homosexuality and gender issues are putting churches at odds with younger generations, leading to disillusionment or disengagement. Political polarization is also a problem, where in some places, religion has become intertwined with political ideologies, causing some to be wary of organized religion due to its association with political stances. We could also talk about changing family structures and how that is playing into the decline. With the changes in traditional family structures and dynamics, there is often less cultural pressure to be a part of a local church as a family unit. Finally, younger generations appear to be prioritizing spiritual *experiences* over religious institutions, leading to a decline in church membership.

But one of the issues that must be taken into consideration is our own growing complacency. Spiritual complacency is a state of indifference or lack of enthusiasm in one's spiritual life. It often results when a person (or congregation) becomes too comfortable in their current spiritual state. The desire to gain deeper understanding, growth, or commitment has waned. This attitude can manifest itself through the routine practice of religious activities without genuine engagement. It can also be revealed through the neglect of reflecting on and applying biblical teachings in daily life. Finally, it is also seen in our becoming self-satisfied without recognition of the need for further spiritual development.

Ours is not the first generation to deal with complacency. Evidently it was a problem for the Jerusalem church as well:

For this reason, we must pay attention all the more to what we have heard, so that we will not drift away. For if the message spoken through angels was legally binding and every transgression and disobedience received a just punishment, how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? This salvation had its beginning when it was spoken of by the Lord, and it was confirmed to us by those who heard him, Hebrews 2.1-3.

## Factors That Contribute to Complacency

### Materialism

This may impact us on a far greater level than we realize. For many, the desire for things is the highest goal in life. Americans have the highest standard of living in the world with one sixth of the world population controlling over half of the world's goods. People who are in the pursuit of the world's possessions usually have little time for spiritual things. They fail to see the lack of permanence in these things, to which Solomon identified as emptiness and vanity ... *striving after the wind*, Ecclesiastes 2.3-11.

We need to be conscious of our priorities ... and seek what is really important, Matthew 6.24.

### Humanism

Humanism is the theology of Darwinism and has become especially prevalent in our society since the 1930's. It is a way of life centered upon human interests and values. This philosophy asserts dignity and worth to mankind and his capacity for self-realization through reason, one that often rejects supernaturalism. It exalts our wishes and accomplishments. It exalts human wisdom and

understanding. It has no place for God. Humanism worships the creation rather than the creator - in this case -- man himself.

Of course Christian principles are built on the opposite kind of foundation. Jesus taught that a person is exalted when he or she learns to deny himself and follow Christ, Luke 9.23-24. Unfortunately, the values of self-denial and sacrificial love for others are not being handed down to the younger generations as they should. Oh that we would do more to apply the virtues of sacrificial love and dedication to others:

“I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,”

John 13.34-35.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others,

Philippians 2.3-4.

## Hypocrisy

The hypocrisy of Christians causes much indifference in the world today. The church is plagued by division. The church is harmed by members who live immoral lives thinking that no one else knows or will find out. The church's influence is also greatly diminished by uncommitted and unconverted members. Why should we ever expect someone to want to be a member of a local church if all they see is the hypocrisy of its members? (While some will always point out the hypocrisy of Christians and use it as an excuse not to convert, the problem of hypocrisy is real and must not be ignored.)

Note Peter's instruction on how we should live:

Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits,

1 Peter 2.11-12.

## How to Address Complacency

### Regular Self-Examination

We need to make time for self-examination and reflection. This can be done by prayer, meditation, or journaling. This is where we assess where we currently stand in our spiritual life and seek to understand the things in which we may be lacking. It involves making a plan to correct these things.

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test, 2 Corinthians 13.5.

### Get Involved

Getting involved with your local congregation can rekindle passion and commitment. If you see something lacking, go to work to fill that need. Organize small groups. Start a community service

project and get others involved. Attend group meetings and events outside of the normally scheduled worship services and bible classes. All of these things can ignite a deeper sense of purpose and connection among your fellow brothers and sisters.

And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, Hebrews 10.24.

### **Find Someone to Mentor**

Those who have been around awhile, i.e., older and more mature members of the church, can offer guidance and support to younger or newer members. This mutual relationship can reinvigorate you as well as the one you are helping.

What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also, 2 Timothy 2.2.

### **Make it Personal**

Recognize that every member of the local church is on a unique spiritual journey. Meet them where they are and be flexible. Commit to connecting with others in ways that resonate most with them.

Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace, James 3.13-18.

### ***For Thought and Reflection***

1. What kind of problem did the early Christians have with drifting? What did the Hebrew writer instruct them to do?
2. How have cultural shifts and secularization impacted the growth of the church?
3. How can churches address the changing social mores without compromising biblical truth?

4. How does materialism contribute to apathy? What can we do about it?
  
5. What are some of the ways you are seeing humanism play itself out in families today? How can we address this individually and as a church?
  
6. Is hypocrisy a problem in the church? Explain.
  
7. How can we answer the claim that the church is full of a bunch of hypocrites? What can you do to lessen the instances of your own personal hypocrisy?
  
8. What are some of the methods you use to examine yourself? How often are you engaged in self-reflection? What measures are you taking to improve your attitudes and actions?
  
9. What are some things you could get involved with in the local work? What are some things you see lacking that you could get involved and meet a need?
  
10. Who is someone you can mentor?
  
11. How might all of these things solve any complacency you have in your life?