

# *Am I a Real Christian?*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3<sup>rd</sup> in an eight-part series

January 27, 2019

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*Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (NIV)*

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

*Leviticus 19:18 (NIV)*

<sup>18</sup> “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

*Mark 12:28–34 (NIV)*

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

<sup>29</sup> “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup> “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

*Are we ready for full-on commitment to our Lord and one another?*

Almost twenty years ago, I read a book that has stayed with me ever since. *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon was written in 1989 and asks the provocative question as to whether Jesus was well-served by Christendom. And, more immediately, how do we Christians in the West live in a post-Christendom age?

When I was a boy in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, everyone that I knew claimed to be a Christian. Even if they had never stepped into a church, if they breathed, they checked off the box, “Christian.” I can’t remember meeting a Jewish person until I was about ten. As for Muslims, well, they lived in a far away land and were no concern of ours. Black or white, male or female, adult or child – we all claimed Jesus.

But here is the hard question that Willimon and Hauerwas ask: Were all those people I knew actually Christian, as in committed to Jesus and becoming an ever-truer disciple of our Lord. Had they all really been born of the Spirit? Had they all truly placed their faith and trust in Jesus, however haltingly? Or were many simply “Christian” because that is what everyone was? Even back then, church attendance was a far cry from 100% and among those attending, there were a lot of prisoners. The truth is certainly that the body of Christ was much smaller than it seemed and, thus, the power to proclaim and live the gospel much reduced.

And now, things are changing faster than ever. Robert Barron wrote recently,<sup>1</sup>

By far the fastest-growing “religious” group in the United States is the “nones,” that is, those who claim no religious affiliation. In the latest Pew Research Center survey, fully 25 percent of the country—80 million people—say that they have no formal religion, and the growth of this cohort is nothing short of startling. In 1970, only 3 percent of the country self-identified as none. In the last ten years, the

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<sup>1</sup> From *First Things* journal. January 2018.

number has gone from 16 percent to the current 25 percent. When we focus on young people, the picture is even more bleak. Almost 40 percent of those under thirty are nones, and among Catholics in that age group, the number rises to 50 percent. Of all the Catholic children baptized or confirmed these last thirty years, half no longer participate in the life of the Church.

Things are not much better among those who still claim the label “Christian.” How many Christians go to church on any given Sunday in America? About twenty years ago, Hadaway and Marler looked at actual churches across America and published their findings on worship attendance in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. They found an actual attendance rate of 20.4%. Makes me wonder what they would find today, as we begin 2019. It is a safe bet that attendance rates would be lower still.

Ironically, Hauerwas and Willimon see these trends and find encouragement. That as the Christians-in-name-only formally leave the Church, the proportion of truly committed Christians will necessarily grow. And in this, there is much hope. In 2019, virtually all of us at St. Andrew will be volunteers, here because we want to be and committed to furthering the cause.

Yet, alongside these changes, a more insidious crisis has emerged in the American church.

#### *A Christless Christianity?*

One of the most important research studies of religion and faith in recent years is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), led by Christian Smith of the University of North Carolina. It was a very well done study, better than most. It is the sort of research in which you can actually have confidence.

Recognizing that the faith of teenagers and young adults tends to reflect that of their parents, Smith and his colleagues came to some startling conclusions:

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U. S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Based on their research, Smith found the key tenets of this new religion to be:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith calls this new faith “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” or simply “MTD.”

Look over these five tenets and ask yourself what, or better, *who* is missing? Of course, Jesus is missing. According to this version of “Christianity” there is no need for Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup>Smith and his colleagues have produced two books, detailing their findings: *Soul Searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers* and, later, *Souls in Transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. As you can tell by the titles, the books reflect the on-going tracking of these people as they got older.

Sure we might need some help from time to time, and it is handy that God is there to lend a hand, but we don't need a rescue from our sinfulness. Sin has no place in MTD.

And what constitutes the "good" we are supposed to do so we can go to heaven. "Be nice." That's it, the sum of human morality and the Judeo-Christian ethic across three millennia. Be nice. Smith gets it right when he calls this new faith "pathetic."

Another NSYR researcher, Kenda Creasy Dean, calls MTD a parasite, living off Christianity, but slowly weakening it and eventually destroying it. She calls MTD "Christian-ish" not Christian.<sup>3</sup>

MTD is a Christless Christianity, as if there could be such a thing. She writes, "Why do teenagers practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Not because they have misunderstood what we have taught them in church. *They practice it because this is what we have taught them in church.*" Gulp.

Yet, to back to last week, we can't ignore the truth of sin. There is something deeply wrong with us that we cannot fix; i.e., we are not "ok." Instead, God must rescue us from ourselves and reconcile us to him. As John the Baptist put it when Jesus came forward to begin his public ministry, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." If there is nothing deeply and fundamentally wrong with us, there is no need for a Savior, nor for God's grace. But there is something wrong that we can't fix. We need rescue and it can only come from God, given by God's grace and received in faith, in trusting the one who desires to save us.

The hard-to-face truth is that we don't create faith in ourselves or in anyone else. When John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed at the age of 39, it was God doing the warming, not the preacher. Despite many extravagant claims, no preacher has ever saved a single soul. It is God who saves, not we. We may like to be in charge and in control, but we aren't.

So . . . what do we actually do then? Just wait for God to do God's thing? Find a comfortable easy chair and pass the time? Do we just hang out until God hits the switch? Or to put it in more Bible-sounding terms, do we pray and then wait patiently on the Lord?

#### *Dry kindling and altogether Christians*

We can't set our own hearts afire, but we are really good at dousing them with cold water. Ever been "tuned out" by your own kids? Ever felt drowned out by the noise of your teenager's life? I imagine God feels much the same way at times.

Thus, Professor Dean hits on a very apt metaphor when she suggests that, though we can't set our own hearts on fire, we can make ourselves *highly combustible*. We can shape ourselves into dry kindling, which even a tenderfoot knows catches fire much more easily than a pile of wet, green wood.

How do we make ourselves highly combustible? The apostle Paul is helpful here. Using an ever-popular sports metaphor (after all, guys are guys), Paul tells these Christians that they have chosen a life that takes training, not merely trying. And certainly not waiting around in an easy chair for God to light a match.

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, The Message).

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<sup>3</sup> From her book, *Almost Christian*, recently published by Oxford University Press. Dean is an associate professor at Princeton Seminary.

We train so that we can learn to love. According to Jesus, the greatest of all God's teachings are that we love God and love one another. Not a sentimental sort of love, but a deep, sure, action-focused love that we show to others. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus' self-sacrificial death on the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others." (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus' life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice.

Our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We are called to love as God has loved us. And we must always remember that for love to be love, it must be freely given.

God calls us to live as "altogether Christians," as Wesley put it, and do so alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ. We baptize our children into this community of God's people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. It has always been this way among us Christians, at least when we have gotten it right. May it always be so!

## Daily Bible Readings

*More on our commitment to love*

**Monday, Exodus 34:1-9** What sort of God are we called to worship?

**Tuesday, 1 John 4:7-21** God is love and we are created to love.

**Wednesday, Micah 6:6-8** What does God require of us?

**Thursday, Luke 10:25-37** Who is this neighbor I am to love?

**Friday, John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16** It is all about love.

**Saturday, Galatians 5:2-15** What is the summation of God's law?

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Daniel.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Embracing the Bible: an introduction to Scripture*

Video of each week's class is posted here: [vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy](https://vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy)