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Burbank Leader

In Theory: Picking what you like from religion

September 25, 2011

Q. A study by LifeWay Research has found that many Americans are moving away from clearly defined denominations toward tailoring their beliefs to suit their own personal preferences. Also, a new survey of 900 U.S. Protestant pastors finds 62% predict the importance of being identified with a denomination will diminish over the next 10 years.

The findings are supported by a new book, "Futurecast," written by religion statistics expert George Barna. Tracking statistics from 1991-2011, he found that all major trends of religious belief were diminishing, except two: More people have accepted Jesus and believe they'll go to heaven, and fewer people are attending church, except for weddings and funerals. Barna blames pastors for this, saying, "People end up bored, burned out and empty. They look at church and wonder, 'Jesus died for this?'" and adds, "People say, 'I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want.'"

Judaism is also facing a similar issue, according to the editor of Moment magazine, Nadine Epstein, who says, "We live in an era where you pick and choose the part of the religion that makes sense to you. And you can connect through culture and history in a meaningful way without necessarily religiously practicing."

Is this cherry-picking of beliefs a good thing? And are pastors to blame?

Answer:

I admit, I was not surprised that Americans over the last 20 years have been moving away from specific religious denominations and traditions, and modifying their beliefs to suit their own individual preferences. However, I do not believe we can characterize such shifts as cherry-picking. The world is a very different place than it was 20 years ago, and people are reacting in ways that make sense to them in light of new, and sometimes frightening, changes.

What some people have discovered is that the restrictive dogmas of many traditional Christian denominations or other faith traditions no longer fit the situations they face today. What I hear from many young couples who ask me to officiate at their weddings is that they consider themselves "spiritual," but not "religious." They want to find their own spiritual paths — paths that inspire them to live with integrity in today's world — outside the strictures of some narrow creed.

To the question about the culpability of the clergy for some of the declines in religious affiliation, I would have to answer, "Yes." When a religious tradition gets locked in the past, it is no wonder that people turn away from beliefs that are no longer relevant to them. As those who are called to be the bearers of the truths of religion to congregants, the clergy must not simply rely on the same old ways of explaining what life and faith mean in a new age. To quote poet and lyricist James Russell Lowell, "New occasions teach new duties." If members of the clergy fail to make their messages germane to the realities that people are facing, they and their faith tradition may well be left in the dust.

I feel very fortunate indeed that the religious tradition I have been called to serve encourages its members and clergy to think and deliberate for themselves in light of past experience, present evidence and future spiritual possibilities. Unitarian Universalists may be accused of many things, but we continue to join together in an ongoing search for truth and meaning, wherever that may lead. Blessed be!

Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

A little church-shopping is fine, I think; especially in this age of multiple and competing Christianities (liberal vs. conservative; outreach-oriented vs. contemplative; message-based vs. sacramental; traditional vs. contemporary/emerging styles of worship). If you try one church and don't like it, by all means try another before giving up on Christianity as a whole. Not all churches are alike. Keep shopping.

But once you leave the bounds of Christianity (or whatever your first religion is), it gets tricky. It takes a great deal of spiritual sophistication, far more than most of us have, to outguess the centuries-old wisdom of the world's great religions, and cobble together your own arrogant blend of beliefs and practices instead.

And there are several dangers if you do.

First: You'll know that's what you did. And if you have any integrity at all, you'll come to suspect that you have fashioned a god in your own image. You'll become restless, because what you have fashioned will come to feel insufficient, not timeless enough, and lacking the grit of generations of people, a broad contemporary community, who have all stood in that same stream, believing.

Second: It's too easy, when you create your own smorgasbord religion, to avoid the theology you'd rather not think about, and to avoid the balance of rigorous disciplines any good religion demands. Any one of them will ask you to confess your flaws, to offer your woundedness for the healing of others, to give away your money and possessions, and to leave the tidy comforts of your self-contained life and suffer your neighbor's pain. You can't take a powder on these things in the name of open-mindedness.

Finally: All the energy it takes to flit among the vast array of religious options will keep you from going very deep into any of them; and you'll end up with a belief system that's a mile wide and an inch deep.

I love all religions; I read about and dabble among them myself. But my best advice is: Pick one. Go deep with it. Then go dancing with the rest.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada Flintridge

Since I've been a pastor for less than 10 years, I can take the blame for only the second decade, but not the first. Seriously, this week's issue is a great one, and I believe it speaks to what we all realize: the major Protestant denominations are in decline, and have been for a long time. And who knows why?

Blaming the pastors is ridiculous and simple-minded. Did all preaching suddenly start to go downhill in 1991? I don't think so. I personally believe we're in the midst of a great transition, and maybe this transition has been put in place by God himself.

A minister friend of mine this very day emailed me that he thought Jesus' ministry was mostly in the streets, because that's where the people were. True, there are some in the pews, but there are more in the streets. Maybe we need to get out more.

Something else is going on, too: a huge mistrust of institutions. According to some recent polls, Americans have little regard for their government, especially the feds in Washington, D.C. In such an environment, can a religious institution expect to get a pass? I hardly think so.

As far as cherry-picking particular beliefs, I see no problem. In fact, I myself am such a cherry-picker. I grew up in the Presbyterian church, but I'm now an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. By the way, the difference in the two denominations is minimal, as far as beliefs are concerned. I also think I could serve comfortably in a United Methodist Church or in the Disciples of Christ (Christian) denomination.

Actually, I see all this mixed-denomination stuff as a good thing. At one time (back in the 16th century), we Protestants killed each other over differences of belief. Thankfully, we don't do that now because the spirit of God, I like to think, has shown us over the centuries that the important things in religion are what we can do for others, not what creed we confess.

So is the church doomed? I wouldn't go that far. God is still speaking and will continue to speak, perhaps in the form we know now as the church and maybe in a different form which has yet to materialize. I have to laugh as I recall what a friend of mine back in the 1960s said. There was a "God is Dead" theological movement then, and my friend said, "I don't think God is dead.... Just his house."

Next time you're taking your kids to a soccer game on a Sunday morning, think about the possibility of visiting one of God's houses at that time — while you still can.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

Cherry-picking God's revealed truth makes about as much sense as taking your watch apart down to its individual pieces and then deciding which ones you want to keep. If you want the watch to work, you'll choose every piece and consult the manufacturer to make sure you put them all together correctly. In fact, you'd probably ask an expert to assemble them for you. Life is God's gift to us. He is the expert. The Bible is our owner's manual and often our repair manual. God's son Jesus gave his life on the cross to repair the incapacitating and fatal

damage sin had done to each of us. God's spirit leads us and empowers us to keep living the eternally productive way God intended.

While pastors in our often great imperfections don't always facilitate spiritual growth the very best way, we did not create the consumer-mindset approach to faith so common today — put what you want in your cart, leave what you don't. We didn't create our culture's self-centered approach to God — “God is there to serve me. When I want his help, I'll call on him. Otherwise I'll do as I please.” This mindset is what the Bible calls “the flesh” — man's sinful nature trying to live independently from God. It's been mankind's problem since Adam fell in Eden.

Cherry-pickers miss out on God's best only because they leave it on the tree. Instead of trying to figure out which of God's ways are good, “Trust in the lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

Let's face it. Diverse Protestant and Catholic denominations all adhere to the Bible. Each one has been developed by some sort of branching off from another, or through development of its own by way of beliefs and political structures. Sometimes we love a particular church but perhaps do not feel a connection with that denomination, but we attend because God has called us to that particular pastor, church family or program for that particular season of our lives. That said, people often practice their faith and or relationship with God in a way that makes sense to their unique convictions that are not black and white in the Bible (not issues of theology, but preferences; to drink or not to drink, to gamble or not to gamble, to attend Saturday church or Sunday).

Many people now offer up more grace, while some may be more pious. Thus it is God's call, the church family, and the programs that often mean more to people in this day and age than being a certain denomination because they were raised that way, or because their family belongs. Even pastors feel called to a particular church, or they answer a call from God to be placed at a church that may not be the denomination they grew up with or have served at before. My viewpoint is that people are more centered on serving God and having a relationship with him, and that makes which denomination they happen to worship at secondary. I am speaking of true believers. This is far different from those who think the Bible is a “good book” and then do whatever they want.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT
Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy
Montrose

I can't argue the stats. They're all too real to me. Every time we have a funeral for one of our long-time saints, I meet a new group of people who grew up at Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church and have fond memories of it, but who live within 3 miles and do not give us a try for their adult faith journeys. I'd love to see these neighbors again, and I'll tell you why.

We have a good thing going on. The people who are engaged in a consistent and meaningful way are enjoying the “cherries” of belief (God loves you) while also growing from the challenges of belief (you must forgive to be free). I guess many people think faith is a yes/no proposition, when really it is a process of growing in personal wholeness, community care, moral courage, sacrificial service and God-directed life choices. There are lots of decisions along the way. In reality, the Christian faith journey has always been individually customized, since Jesus accepts us as we are from the moment we stand before him and then offers us healing and transformation – the same way he did to Zaccheus, Mary Magdalene, blind Bartimaeus, and many more. One size has never fit all.

Is it the fault of pastors that people don't know this or haven't experienced it? Sure, we'll take much of the blame. Going deeper in the faith asks people to explore uncomfortable questions about their lives and assumptions. Sometimes it's easier to get mad at the pastor for pushing than it is to push through a personal obstacle. And pastoral livelihoods are dependent on happy congregations. So we wimp out, rather than model the moral courage we preach. It's shameful behavior. We confess it before God and the readers of the Sunday paper.

The stats show us that a new Reformation is at hand. The next phase of “church” already looks different, because “church” has been appropriately humbled. We can't pretend to love and get away with it. We have to practice real love, real reconciliation and real compassion. Come practice with us.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

I don't think that cherry-picking of one's religious beliefs is a good thing. While I suppose it could be argued that having a little bit of religion is better than having none at all, I feel strongly that a person can find genuine fulfillment, happiness and comfort within traditional modes of spirituality. We do not need to create a personalized concoction of assorted ideas to achieve contentment.

In today's day and age, everyone wants to feel good — which is actually a positive trend, since people who feel good about themselves will inevitably be able to be generous and kind toward others. As a result of the emphasis on personal happiness, we find more and more people wanting to find their comfort zones in religious practice. There is nothing wrong with that, so long as the basic tenets of the respective religion are preserved. Jewish texts laud the pursuit of happiness and the quest for contentment. We are taught that a spiritual lifestyle can be very rewarding and meaningful, especially if we do not tinker with its foundational teachings.

Finally, I am of the opinion that if there are so few people in our houses of worship, and scores are being lost daily, that it is incumbent upon the clergy to hear the message of the people and make some changes. Members of the cloth have a responsibility to ensure that the spiritual message of their particular faith stays relevant and fresh. In particular, religious leaders must strive to reach out to the young and affect them in a positive fashion. By explaining how the age-old values of religion genuinely apply to the issues of today — and by showing that traditional practices can create a rich, gratifying life — we can revitalize our institutions and

appeal to a contemporary audience.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

As long as man continues to possess intelligence, denominations will persist because every worldly thing denominates — that is, falls into categories. Consider taxonomy, the science of denominating creation into groups and naming things according to their natures. Dogs are not cats, but both are nice pets. They share the same kingdom, phylum, class and order, but completely different family, genus and species. Likewise, lobsters and cockroaches may share the classifications of animal kingdom and arthropod phylum, but all else differs; one's a yummy crustacean, the other an insect that may be edible, but yuk!

In the same way, religion may be the top category under which all faiths begin, but that's it. I think today's question is asking about denominations at the taxonomic bottom. My religion may fall into the kingdom of all religions, but it shares only a phylum with those religions that believe in a deity. The class my religion shares would be only with those which believe the deity is personal. The order shared would only be with those believing the deity is one god, rather than many. Among the three monotheistic religions, mine falls under the family of Christianity. Protestant, would then be the genus, Congregational, the species, and Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (our denomination) the subspecies.

Now unless you think cats and dogs are the same thing, or you don't mind ordering Cockroach Thermidor at your local restaurant, then you can never say denominations are unimportant.

Some denominations go away, like so many sports franchises. Two minor league teams, the Bethlehem Bulldogs and the St Paul Apostles, have not endured, but others have, and new ones have formed. So with Christianity; we all share the same family, but what family agrees on everything? Differences denominate us, and while most Temperance denominations have passed away, Christians now denominate over issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and biblical inerrancy. If you've read this column for very long, you'll note that my colleague Skip Lindeman agrees on just about nothing with me, but we are the same species. Which pastor you cherry-pick will determine your church location, and that's a typical denominational difference.

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose

We see our neighbors often now choosing affiliation to beliefs differently than their parents and grandparents did. In the past, a child would grow up in one church or belief tradition and be very unlikely to change. Today in the United States more people each year are choosing how to be affiliated to beliefs and are open to moving away from the beliefs of their parents.

Pastors should not be blamed for the changes in belief and church attendance in the U.S. Instead, it is more helpful to look at changes in how people interact, how they gain knowledge

and wisdom and how they use their time. In past generations, people met and interacted together through institutions like churches and schools. In those years, the churches provided many group social bonding services, which included fun activities, emotional support, quality of life, family services, group events, organization, leadership and child education.

Today people can meet, associate and have fun and educational activities with people they connect with through social media, the Internet and phone connections. Also knowledge, wisdom, experiences, stories and information about beliefs are available through many more avenues. This leads many people to mix and match their beliefs differently from their parents. So some people do not belong to one denomination, but build from a combination of beliefs.

Finally, people use their time differently. Many individuals in the U.S. consider a few hours on Sundays to be valuable time that is best used for the fulfillment of their personal goals. These changes that have taken place in our society have resulted in people now being less likely to remain with only one denomination, and less likely to attend a religious service each week.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena

The LifeWay Research study highlights the fact that more and more people are moving away from denominations and are seeking religious beliefs that fit their personal preferences and needs. Why is this?

I'm reminded of an observation that the apostle Paul made about individuals in the last days when he said, "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7).

Paul also said, "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Ephesians 4:14).

In our enlightened and mobile age, individuals move easily among religions. Much of this has to do with the psyche of our society as a whole. We are a self-centered, consumer-oriented society that believes in entitlements. We want to be entertained and we don't want to be held responsible for our actions. Moral relativity is replacing absolute truths. We have much knowledge, but do we have wisdom?

This may be a harsh analysis of our society, but I believe it explains, in part, the religious trends noted in the study. In saying this, I do not suggest that the hands on the clock should be turned back. Not at all. No society, past or present, is perfect, and each has its own flaws and issues. We have made great strides in many areas, but we do have our flaws and issues, and they are manifesting themselves in how we approach religion.

I don't believe in tailored religion that fits personal preferences. Rather, Jesus taught, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Our task is to seek Jesus and follow him as outlined in the Bible.

Rick Callister
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