

*Ephesians 2:1–10 (The Message, a paraphrase)*

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

*Galatians 1:6–9 (NRSV)*

<sup>6</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup> not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.<sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!<sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

*“Pop” Christianity? A world religion?*

We've been over this ground before and we'll come to it again. Something has happened and is happening in western Christianity, especially the U.S. In Europe, many people have abandoned Christianity in toto. Visiting European churches is largely a project of visiting museums and other community centers. In the U.S., the vast majority of people still profess their belief in Jesus, but how many people who self-identify as Christian actually go to church on any given Sunday in America? What's your guess?

That is a harder question to get a good handle on than you might think. Gallup has for years asked people, “Did you attend a worship service in the last week?” The typical responses run about 40% “yes.” However, virtually all researchers who study these topics believe that the Gallup figure is inflated. Some respondents are honestly mistaken and others simply want to say they were at church.

About fifteen years ago, researchers 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%.

Christian Smith, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina and lead researcher on the National Study of Youth and Religion, says, “I think the actual number is halfway between the Gallup figure and the Hadaway figure, 27-30%. However, if it came out that [Hadaway] was right and the actual number was 20%, I would not be too surprised.”<sup>1</sup> So where is everybody? George Barna thinks he has some of the answers.

Barna is certainly the busiest market researcher of all things Christian. He has conducted many surveys over the years and recently stepped back to look at the state of religion in America, conducting a “meta-analysis” of over 30,000 surveys collected across more than eight years. Barna's multivariate analysis of the data identified seven groupings of similar

<sup>1</sup>From an article by Bob Smietana, “Statistical Illusion,” published by *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> This is from George Barna's book, *The Seven Faith Tribes: Who they are, what they believe, and why they*

responses, which he labeled: Casual Christians, Captive Christians, American Jews, Mormons, Pantheists, Muslims, and Spiritual Skeptics.<sup>2</sup>

Notice that Barna's analysis revealed *two* clearly discernible groups among the self-described Christians, which he labeled Casual Christians and Captive Christians. You could call them something else, but the point is that Barna found two distinct groups in American Christianity, as distinct a divide as between the other major religions. It is as if the word "Christianity" is used to denote two different faiths.

Barna found that the breakdown was 80% Casual and 20% Captive. Thus, since about 80% of Americans are self-described Christians, fully two-thirds (.8 x .8) of all responses ended up in the grouping, Casual Christian. Barna writes, "By sheer weight of numbers, the Casuals define the status quo. This group is, in a very real sense, the eight-hundred pound gorilla that established the standards of the moral and spiritual life of the United States. In every respect, until something happens to intentionally alter matters, theirs is the default condition of the country.

Here's a bit from Barna on what he learned about the "Casual" Christians:

- Only 18% of the Casuals believe that spiritual maturity requires a commitment to a church.
- 2/3 believe that "God helps those who help themselves."
- 2/3 believe that success in life is about personal accomplishments, not obedience to God.
- Casuals believe that life is their personal responsibility and God is waiting in the wings to nudge them and even to save them when times get desperate.
- Casuals believe that God is more interested in their happiness than their holiness.

In contrast, here are a few of Barna's comments on the "Captive" Christians:

- 96% strongly believe that the purpose of life is to love God with all their hearts, mind, strength, and souls.
- Captives see themselves as "deeply spiritual creatures who are full-time servants of the Living God."
- Their most important relationship is with God.
- Their most important reference group is the Church.
- They see their faith as the very heart of their existence and daily purpose.

Since so-called "Captive" Christians make up only 16% of American adults in Barna's research, it isn't very hard to understand why worship attendance is such a casual thing to so many self-professed Christians. As Barna writes, "Casuals do not get too excited about matters of faith." To put it differently, the Casuals lack passion for their faith, their church, or their Lord.

All of this should be deeply troubling to those who want everyone to come to the loving embrace of Jesus. It should be deeply troubling to all who are concerned about the future of the U.S. Will our churches one day also be little more than museums and community centers? What do we do? What could we do? The problem is just so big.

Perhaps, we should begin by properly diagnosing the problem. The research suggests the problem is not that the country is being secularized. The problem is that Christianity itself is being secularized, changing into a religion that isn't really Christian at all. Or, better put, Christianity in America has given birth to a new religion within itself and is danger of being consumed by this new religion that goes by the same name. Here again, the researchers can help us see the path ahead a bit more clearly.

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<sup>2</sup> This is from George Barna's book, *The Seven Faith Tribes: Who they are, what they believe, and why they matter*. Tyndale House Publishers. 2009. If you are interested in this sort of thing, Barna's book is an interesting read.

*“Pop” Christianity – essentially Christless*

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 from the University of North Carolina. I won't bore you with the details of their methodology, but it is a very well done study, better than most. They did phone surveys with several thousand older youth, tracked them over a period of years, and supplemented the phone surveys with in-depth interviews of hundreds of them. It is the sort of research you can actually have confidence in.

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, including:

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>3</sup>

Based on their research, Smith found the key tenets of this new “Christianity” 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. 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 to be rescued 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.” This “pop Christianity” is morally hollow, spiritually vapid, and intellectually dreary.

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>4</sup> as I do in my new book coming out later this year, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*.

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.

Take a moment and compare the sampling of statements from Barna about the “Casual Christians” and Smith's tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The similarities are evident to all who are willing to see them.

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<sup>3</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.

<sup>4</sup> From her book, *Almost Christian*, recently published by Oxford University Press. Dean is an associate professor at Princeton Seminary.

Need a bit more? Scot McKnight works extensively with young adults and has for fifteen years. He writes, “Reared on self-esteem and impervious to guilt, the next generation needs good news that can break through their defenses.” McKnight goes on to say that you can’t talk about sin and grace to someone reared on Mister Rogers<sup>5</sup> and “I’m Ok, You’re Ok.” Even more telling is this, “iGens have a robust enough self-image to think Jesus is just like them.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the whole point of the cross, the climactic moment in the Christian story, is that 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 sins of the world.” If there is nothing deeply and fundamentally wrong with us, which we call “sin,” there is no need for a Savior, nor for God’s grace.

Thirty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote to new believers in Galatia. Though they had been taught by Paul, they were changing their new-found faith into something that was no longer the genuine Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul saw the danger in this so clearly that he wrote, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (Galatians 1:6-8).

Still today, we have to work to stay true to the gospel proclaimed in the Bible and passed on to us in the great apostolic tradition. May we see the task before us and resolve to do our part. We’ll close with a quote from a theology professor at McGill University in Montreal:

I am personally not very much worried about the reduction in numbers where Christianity . . . [is] concerned. I am far more concerned about the qualitative factor: what kind of Christianity . . . are we talking about?

Douglas John Hall

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The challenge here is to see that Smith, Dean, and the others are not talking merely about a half-hearted effort to be a “good” Christian. They are talking about the emergence of a new brand of Christianity. Not merely a new denomination or a new take on Christian theology, but a new religion, a “pop Christianity” that is untethered from the gospel of the apostles. Ross Douthat at the NY Times is more direct in the title of his recent book: *Bad Religion: How we became a nation of heretics*. So the first question you might discuss is whether you see any of this. Look back over the five tenets of “MTD” (p. 3). Do you think that these tenets express a different religion than Christianity? If you do, could you explain to someone why these do not express the basics of Christianity?
2. We put vast amounts of time, effort, and money into our educations, our jobs and careers, our families and more. How much time and effort have you spent on learning what it means to be a Christian, on even the basics of our faith? How much have you and others relied on what you can pick up in a sermon or a small groups discussion? In the early years of Christianity, many new believers went through a three-year period of instruction and discipling before they were even baptized! Is there something we can learn from that? As Dean put it in her book, the youth in our churches didn’t invent this “pop Christianity,” they were taught it.

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<sup>5</sup>It is worth remembering that Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood went on national television in 1968. The original publication date of the book, *I’m Ok, You’re Ok* was in 1967. Both more than forty years ago.

<sup>6</sup>From McKnight’s article, “The Gospel for iGens,” in *Leadership* journal, summer, 2009. McKnight is a much-published New Testament scholar and theologian from Northpark University.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Deuteronomy 6</b> What the Israelites have learned is to be remembered and passed on.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Proverbs 4</b> There is so much to learn. God's way must be learned at any cost. There is no other way.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9</b> Are we ready for solid food or are we satisfied with milk? After all we know how easily milk goes bad.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Ephesians 4:14-16</b> We should not settle for being infants in our faith, blown here and there by every fad and trend.</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Timothy 4:11-16</b> Paul's instruction to his young associate. Notice the bond between doctrine and living in v. 16.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

