

IS THE CHURCH DYING?

Our title for this brief article is the same as that of an article written by Phil Sanders, the regular speaker for "The Search" T.V. program. In that article brother Sanders noted some survey numbers from a recent Pew Forum survey that revealed that Christianity is dying. According to the survey, those that call themselves Christians in America have declined from 78.4 to 70.6 percent. Although not from the survey, brother Sanders also stated that Churches of Christ are losing more than 8,000 members and about fifty churches each year. This certainly appears to be chilling numbers to any who care about the souls of men.

Though we wish not to detract from the seriousness of the loss of members and congregations, we would like to be realistic about this whole subject. Let us consider a few things that may help keep us from becoming frantic or depressed.

First, the group (called the Evangelicals) that included the Lord's church, had only a one percent decrease, the lowest of any of the groups. And of course, all those other groups and a large percentage of those in this group have not been lost, they were already lost. They are no more lost now than they would be if they left some denomination and became an atheist.

Secondly, those with strong convictions remained about the same in numbers, it was those who dabbled in religion who were leaving. Even of those who are members of the Lord's church, those who are lukewarm or do nothing members are already lost (Rev. 3:16; Matt. 25:26, 30). Far, far too many who are listed as members of the Lord's church fail the test of faith in their lack of serious participation as a member of the family of God. The church may lose numbers when they leave, but those souls were already lost.

A final point that needs to be recognized is that although faithful Christians have a responsibility to teach the gospel to others, teaching whenever and where ever they can, it is the responsibility of the individual being taught to obey the gospel and live faithfully by it. As Paul said, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (I Cor. 3:6). If there is a failure on the part of our efforts to teach and lead others to the truth, it needs to be corrected, especially in our efforts with our own children, which often leave home and the church at the same time. In the end, it is our job to do all we can to teach, no matter the numbers we end up with.

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A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME...

We've all heard the saying, "a rose by any other name is still a rose". It's a true saying. We're not talking about flowers in this article, but sin. Sin by any other name is still sin! In our society, people often use terms that are designed to remove some of the stigma that has long been associated with the practice under consideration. For instance, homosexuality is usually referred to as "an alternate lifestyle". Now admittedly, in some cases the stigma associated with a word may not be warranted. However, when anything presented in the Bible as "sin", is covered up with another name, it is still just plain old sin.

What is sin? Let's let the Bible define it for us. Sin is a transgression of the law of God. "*Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law*" (I John 3:4). The word that is most often translated "sin" in the New Testament is one that literally meant "to miss the mark" and was used to describe what had happened when the archer failed to hit his target with the arrow. Thus, to violate God's word, going beyond or falling short, is sin.

Sin is often separated into these two categories, going beyond and falling short. These categories can be designated, sins of commission and sins of omission. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were guilty of a sin of commission, they did what God said not to do (Gen. 2:17; 3:6). Their son Cain was guilty of a sin of omission; he did not do as God told him to do (Gen. 4:5-7). With either kind of sin, the end result is the same.

What is the end result of sin? Sin separates one from God. Isaiah wrote, "*...your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear*" (Isa. 59:2). Peter wrote, "*For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil*" (I Pet. 3:12). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

However, there is a cure for sin. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, "*But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness*" (Rom. 6:17-18). When one obeys the gospel of Christ, the blood of the Lamb of God will wash away his sins.

Robert