

Are Pastors the Cause of the Loss of Church Membership?

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In my RRA Presidential Address, I want to present the idea that the pastor's sermon is the cause of membership decline in churches of the mainline denominations. To do that, I need to eliminate two other arguments for the decline. Those arguments are that the liberal stance of mainline churches is the cause of their loss of members and the argument that members' low birth rate is the cause of their decline.

I think it has been clearly shown that the liberal stance that the mainline churches have taken on political or social issues have not been the cause of their decline. I won't rehash these studies but just mention that Hoge, Luidens and Johnson (1994) in the book *Vanishing Boundaries* showed again that these stances have not hurt the mainline. Hout and Fisher (2002) in their ASR article argued that the conservative political stance of churches has resulted in the increase of politically liberal persons checking no religion in national polls. The Hout and Fisher (2002) study is not limited to mainline members, as I will say more about later.

In case some of you might still think the liberal stance has hurt membership, Barna (2003) earlier in this decade noted that the millions of young unchurched have no understanding of or interest in a church, even if it is "contemporary" in style. He did not make any distinction between liberal and conservative churches. They are all losing the youth. He says: "Millions of young adults are more interested in truth, authenticity, experiences, relationships and spirituality than they are in laws, traditions, events, disciplines, institutions and religion." Barna did not mention sermons, but I would not be surprised if he has been unhappy with their quality.

There is no doubt that the declining birth rate has affected the membership of mainline churches, but denominations have not been able to hold on to the younger members they have. Hoge et al. (1994) in a study of baby boomers that had been confirmed in the Presbyterian Church about 15 or 20 years earlier found that 45% of

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these baby boomers were no longer active in any church. Newsweek (Adler 2005) cited a poll by the City University of New York that found that between 1990 and 2001 the number of persons identifying themselves as Presbyterians increased by 12%. According to Ida Smith-Williams of Research Services, Presbyterians lost about 9% of their membership in that time period.

In the mid 1980s the Presbyterian Church commissioned a national random sample poll of the population. The results of that poll showed that twice as many people identified themselves as Presbyterian as were on the membership rolls. It is clear a large number of persons identifying themselves as Presbyterian are not members of a congregation. I contend they are not members in part because of the clergy.

I wish I had a recent study that shows that those who left were liberal. Other than the study by Hoge and his colleagues, we don't have studies of people who have left a particular denomination. I think it is safe to say that if you left the Presbyterian Church and still identify yourself as a Presbyterian but are not a member and don't attend a church that you are probably not theologically conservative.

Stephen Warner (1988) in his excellent study of a congregation in Mendocino, California shows the importance of the pastor. That was a study of a single congregation. We do know that pastors are important in attracting new members. Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (2003), reporting on a random sample of persons in the United States, state that 36% of first time attendees return after a first visit to a service because of the quality of the sermon. The other top reasons were friendliness of the people, 32% and overall worship experience, 30%. In another study Research Services (1998) reported that 65% of the new members chose "Quality of the sermon" when asked what "most impressed you and made you want to return for a second time".

Many denominations acknowledge that pastors are important in church growth at least in terms of their new church developments. Many denominations have in place screening programs and training programs for pastors who are going to start new congregations. Some denominational officials have told me that they have trouble finding pastors who meet the criteria for a new church development pastor.

Denominational and seminary staff seem to be admitting the problem is the clergy when they complain that the best and brightest no longer go into ministry and that is why membership is falling. That may be true but the loss of membership started when the supposed best and brightest were in the parish and now they, the "best and brightest" are running the show.

Logically, it would seem to me that if people join a congregation because of the pastor or the pastor's sermon, they would leave for the same reason.

The first evidence I had of the importance of the clergy was in 1982. In that year I got my first personal computer and to teach myself how to use electronic databases I entered about ten years' worth of data from a small synod in what was then known as the American Lutheran Church. I noticed this one congregation had lost a number of members. I checked to see who the pastor was and what happened at the other congregations he had served. It turns out he was an expert in downsizing congregations. Each congregation he served started losing members when he became the pastor.

To me, Hoge et al. (1994, p. 178) show that the problem is with the clergy's message. They quote one of their respondents as saying he left the church because of the pastor's sermons. They downplay this because they don't think congregational life is any better or worse than it was in the past. I think there have been changes in the sermons, which I will show later. What they do say is that the drop in membership is a result of a change in beliefs. "Presbyterians no longer learn much from their ministers and Sunday school teachers about the historical doctrinal or standards of the church. Little emphasis is on sin, judgment and the necessity of redemption. The emphasis is on ethics and Christian service. All of this has blurred the distinction between the Christian life and the life of 'good people'" (Hoge et al. 1994, p. 191). Presbyterians are not given any reason why they should have to join a church or attend church.

Hoge and colleagues (1994) did not think a return to hellfire and damnation sermons would attract or hold the youth, but they do say a congregation can grow by providing four commodities:

Religious education

Personal support

Sense of community

Inspiration and spiritual guidance

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To me these are the commodities that Wuthnow (2007) in his book *After the Baby Boomers* said the twenty- and thirty-somethings want or need. Sermons cannot provide all of those things. The sermon should provide more than you get from talk radio. If the pastors of mainline congregations are to keep liberal members, they have to acknowledge that the Bible is not a resource for learning how the earth was made. Pastors have to acknowledge modern Biblical Scholarship does exist. Giving sermons that assume your members have a belief in the inerrancy of scripture or come to church to hear a psychology lecture assures the continued loss in membership.

A problem is that research in general goes easy on pastors. How many of you have read any research that says pastors are not doing their jobs or that the seminaries should be ashamed of the graduates they turn out? Wuthnow (1988) in his book *The Restructuring of American Religion* does point out that the evangelicals started to grow when they realized that they needed a coherent systematic theology that dealt with all of life. It is time the mainline seminaries looked hard at what sort of coherent systematic theology their graduates have at graduation.

To show why I think sermons have become irrelevant to persons who do not see the Bible as inerrant and to show contrary to what Hoge et al. (1994) thought I looked at the sermons of the Protestant Hour and how the sermons have changed over the years. Specifically I looked at the 1950s and then the 1970s. The people Hoge et al. studied were confirmed in the 1970s. I learned about the Protestant Hour through interviews with various staff of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and an interview with John Brockhoff, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The University of Georgia (2011) has started an archive of past programs. The Protestant Hour is a half-hour radio program that was started in 1945 by the

southern branch of the Presbyterian Church. Almost immediately after it started, the southern parts of the Methodist, Episcopalian and United Lutheran Church denominations were invited to join. Each of the denominations had one fourth of the Sundays in each year. In the beginning this program was mostly broadcast on radio stations in the South. It grew to become a national program. By the 1980s to the best of my knowledge it was on its way down. In the 1990s it was in severe financial trouble. It continues today and has what looks to me like a good web page. It is hard to know how many listeners they have. In Louisville, the program is on at 4.00 a.m.

For the most part, at least among Lutherans and Presbyterians, the preachers were theologically moderate. The Methodists usually had a bishop preach, as did the Episcopalians, although for a number of years the Episcopalians read the works of C.S. Lewis. The vast majority of times speakers were nationally known at least within their denomination. The denominations did not always have ordained clergy speaking. The Presbyterians would sometimes have a U.S. senator or a governor preach. What is important is that the denominations sponsored this program. The speakers were not out of the mainstream. In the late 1940s the Methodists had Senator John Sparkman from Alabama preach on stewardship. Stewardship was the Methodist theme for the year and the Senator was head of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Good stewardship, according to him, would be if you would write your senator and congressman and have him support passage of the defense department budget. It wasn't quite that blatant, but he did mention how important the Defense Department budget was, especially for the humanitarian aid we needed to supply. He mentioned they should let their senators and congressman know how they felt.

For the most part, for this address, I am going to use examples from the Presbyterian sermons. The quotations given are to show that in the 1950s the clergy were specific in interpreting doctrine and mentioned where they stood, but in the 1970s they were not specific and said little about doctrine. These quotes should not be taken as representative of the views of the pastor being quoted. I have not looked at other sermons they have preached or at their other written work. The quotes are examples of what was preached on the Protestant Hour.

In the early 1950s the Lutheran sermons were very anti-communist and strongly supported the Korean War. The preachers wanted those Chinese communists killed. They would talk about the Christian churches that had been burned and the Christians the Chinese communists had killed. On the other hand, these Lutherans were not happy with capitalism. One pastor pointed out in disapproval that some people were buying two cars and spending money on televisions while we still had starving people in this world. They did not approve of consumerism.

In 1957 Herman L. Turner preached a sermon dealing with integration entitled "Developing Brotherhood". The pastor speaking was a Presbyterian pastor in Atlanta, and he was also head of the Georgia Council of Churches. Talking about integration he says, "It is going to take time and a lot of patience." He goes on to say, "It took more than 400 years for the Israelites to be delivered out of Egyptian bondage and the Exodus itself was a period of forty years." From today's vantage

point, it does not look progressive, but it was for that time period. At a minimum the pastor was taking a position.

In the 1950s the small conservative Presbyterian denomination in the north joined the Protestant Hour. In 1958 the conservative northern Presbyterians merged with the larger, more liberal northern Presbyterian denomination. The northern church used its 12 sermons to preach on the need for strong ecumenical relations, and it did it by explaining what they believed. I cannot find anything similar to that in the 1970s. I want to read part of the first sermon in this series “Oneness in Spirit”. The preacher, The Rev. Ansley C. Moore, is a member of the small northern denomination that had good relations with the southern Presbyterians. He is trying to reassure the southern Presbyterians that all is well: “I have preached in Northern Presbyterian Churches from Maine to California and from Chicago to Miami and I have never met a radical Presbyterian minister.” He goes on to say, “I shall never forget the morning we merged in May, this Spring. We marched in the pouring rain, the two merging General Assemblies to the Mosque where we met for Holy Communion.” I can just imagine what would happen today if the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had communion in a Mosque.

In 1955, John A. Redhead, Jr. preached on the Apostles’ Creed, specifically on what it means that the Son was conceived by the Holy Spirit. I do not do the sermon justice by saying the conclusion was that you need not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin. The sermon explains doctrine. Redhead mentions that the words “born of the Virgin Mary” “have set off a whole forest fire of arguments”. I can assure you that if a pastor of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gave that sermon today on the radio it would set off a very large fire.

John Redhead was a very articulate preacher and he was not seen as a liberal. But his sermons would definitely be seen as liberal today and that is why I think the Presbyterian Church is losing members. In a sermon in 1964 he says, “Finally there is the story of the Virgin Birth, which you may or may not believe to be a fact. But whether you believe it or not, you can see what it is seeking to say.” In another sermon he is talking about Adam and Eve. He says Adam represents mankind (I am sure today Redhead would have said humankind). Nothing about Adam being the first human or that we are all descended from him.

I am going to stop here with examples from the 1950s and early 1960s and give examples now from the sermons of the 1970s when some of the Baby Boomers that Hoge et al. (1994) studied were confirmed.

The sermons of the 1970s hardly ever say anything about doctrine or explain any of the biblical text. The sermons are preached as if you have a view that you can take everything said in the Bible literally. They also are not all that clear. Johanna H. Bos in a 1979 sermon said: “We read and know it well that God spoke to Israel. We call the book we read it in the Word of God. Perhaps we sometimes forget that he is also and above all the one who He is.” What does that say?

Catherine Gunsalua Gonzalus’s 1974 sermon “The Special Significance of The Whole Bible” stresses that the whole Bible and not just the New Testament is the Word of God. It lacked details. What is meant by the Word of God is never explained. The danger of misinterpreting the Word is mentioned, but not how you should interpret the Word.

In another sermon the topic is who has the truth of God. The pastors in this dialogue sermon say often people on both sides of an issue think they have the truth of God. As examples, they mention some members going to Canada to avoid the draft because they thought the Vietnam war was wrong, while others held the opposite view and enlisted in the armed forces. They raise the question of whether abortion is right or wrong. Nowhere do they take a stand. In the 1950s there was a sermon against drinking. The pastor starts out by saying nowhere in the Bible does it say you should not drink alcohol. Then he says here is why I think Bible is telling me that we should not drink alcohol. He took a stand. The clergy is the 1970s seem afraid to take a stand.

It is no surprise that the more liberal persons are leaving the church if pastors in general are not taking a stand or giving any interpretation of the Bible that is not conservative. There does not seem to be any discussion of how Christians have interpreted scriptures over the years. There seems to be little religious education in the sermons.

Now I admit that my interpretation of these sermons is subjective. As I mentioned earlier, the sermons I quoted may not be representative of that specific preacher. Not all the sermons of the 1970s or later are bad. There are some very good ones, but in general the sermons do not give you any reason why you should go to church. When I mentioned to a friend of mine who is a denominational official that sermons do not teach us about doctrine or the beliefs of the denomination, he said they are not supposed to. That type of sermon would be seen as lecturing. Another friend mentioned that at some seminaries you do not even need to take a preaching course to graduate.

Maybe the fault is the seminaries. Or maybe it is the denominations. They blame each other. Seminaries get their support from tuition and very little from denomination so they are accused of accepting just about any warm body for the students' tuition money. I have heard seminary officials say they are not a vocational school set up to turn out preachers. Denominations, in turn, always have had a hard time saying no when a person asks to be ordained. Is it the denomination's low standards that are the problem, or do the seminaries not care enough about what type of pastor they turn out?

Visit a number of congregations and listen to a variety of preaching. I am sure if you do you will agree that a sound study looking at the role of preaching in the decline of membership is long overdue.

Thank you all. I have been honored to be a president of the RRA

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