

Church Growth and Decline

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The Following is a summary of: “*Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline*” by Benton Johnson, Dean Hoge and Donald Luidens in *First Things*, March 1993.

Why have so many young people departed?

1. One theory attributes the decline to the shift toward greater individual autonomy and freedom from institutional restraints that got under way in the mid-1960s.
2. Another theory traces the decline to the fact that middle class people born since World War II are far more likely than their predecessors to have earned higher degrees, presumably absorbing in the process the agnosticism of modern academia.
3. But other theories attribute the decline to factors internal to the mainline churches themselves:
 - a) attributes the exodus of young people to protest against the churches’ supposed indifference to the sufferings and struggles of the blacks, the poor, and other oppressed groups. The advocates of this notion argued that if the church did not become “relevant” it would lose its youth.
 - b) others (conservatives) make the opposite argument. It contends that people have left the mainline churches in protest against the support that denominational officials and agencies have given since the mid-1960s to left-wing causes such as abortion rights and Third World revolutionary movements. According to its proponents, those who have deserted the mainline churches have done so in search of a richer spiritual diet.
4. An intra-religious theory is advanced by Dean M. Kelly in a book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (1972). He argued that mainline denominations have lost members because they have become weak as religious bodies. Weak religions allow a diversity of theological viewpoints, do not and can not command much of their members’ time or effort, promote few if any distinctive rules of conduct, and discipline no one for violating them. In short, strong religions foster a level of commitment that binds members to the group: weak religions have lost levels of commitment and are unable to resist influences that lower it even further .

Since careful tests of these theories have never been made, no consensus has emerged as to which, if any, of them best explains why mainline churches have lost members.

In our study we discovered a pattern in the theological views of people who, on the Gallop-style theological questions, seemed to pick and choose their responses in unorthodox ways. We have named this pattern the *Theology of Lay Liberalism* .Orthodox Christian belief of one variety or other, which the fundamentalists and other conservatives in our sample espouse, seems to impel people to commit their time and other resources to a distinctively Christian regimen of witness and obedience in the company of other believers. Lay liberalism, on the other hand, is not an empowering system of belief but rather a set of conjectures concerning

religious matters. It supports honesty and other moral virtues, and it encourages tolerance and civility in a pluralistic society, but it does not inspire the kind of conviction that creates strong religious communities.

Of all the various theories of mainline church decline, Dean Kelly's receives the most support from our findings. The mainline denominations do seem to be weak in the sense of being unable to generate and maintain high levels of commitment among a substantial portion of their adherents. Although we are skeptical of Kelly's argument about the relation between strictness and church growth, he is right that weak churches are in a precarious position as organizations because further weakening may diminish their members' commitments to the point of non-involvement.

There has been further evidence that the erosion of main line Protestant strength has been a long-term process. Many have shown that evangelical and fundamentalist bodies have been growing faster than the more liberal denominations for at least seventy years. Long before membership decline set in, mainline denominational newspapers and magazines were merging or ceasing publication, Sunday and Wednesday night worship services had been abandoned, and foreign missions staffs had declined dramatically. Nationwide data gathered in the mid-1960s showed that mainline Protestants not only held less orthodox views than did evangelicals, they also attended church less frequently and had fewer close friends in their own congregations.

In our opinion, the mainline Protestant membership loss is simply the next stage of this process of declining commitment to the church and to Christian faith and witness.

The underlying problem of the mainline churches cannot be solved by new programs of church development alone. That problem is the weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life.

Mainline Protestants in general and Presbyterians in particular are well educated. Many of their forebears read such authors as Darwin, H.L. Mencken, and Aldous Huxley. In response to the currents of modernity, denominational leaders promoted ecumenism and dialogue, but they did not devise or promote compelling new versions of distinctively Christian faith. They did not fashion or preach a vigorous apologetics.

In the past, the tradition from which today's mainline Protestant denominations sprang has shown a remarkable ability to reinvigorate itself in response to challenges and crises. The First and Second Great Awakenings contributed greatly to the churching of America. In recent times, the right wing of this tradition has revitalized itself in the form of modern evangelicalism. But in the twentieth century its left wing has lost the ability to mobilize the support of its vast constituency.

Perhaps some now unforeseen cultural shift will one day bring millions of baby boom dropouts back to the mainline churches. But nothing we discovered in our study suggests the likelihood of such a shift. If the mainline churches want to regain their vitality, their first step must be to address theological issues head-on. They must listen to the voices of lay liberals and provide compelling answers to the question, ***What's so special about Christianity?***

