

# Even America's Largest Denomination Is Bleeding Members: Is It Too Late?

*Further erosion of membership within America's largest denomination, Southern Baptist, shows a larger trend of churches losing [bleeding] members. Byron Barlowe believes the answer may not be more programs, even evangelism programs.*

Many wonder about the state of the Christian Church in the U.S. How is it doing? Is it holding steady or shrinking? [At Probe, we are constantly monitoring](#) this vital question, doing raw-data-level cultural research.

We got another indication recently that the Evangelicals in America are on their way down like Catholics and Mainline Protestants have been for years. At this rate, the Church may drop into relative obscurity—or at least become a small subculture. Read on despite your denominational (or churchless) background because American culture is morphing under all our feet. The ripple effects are only beginning.

Just before this post was written, the Southern Baptist Convention was gathering to address topics like the ongoing decline in America's largest Protestant denomination. Top of the agenda: despite adding around 500 new congregations, it is bleeding membership and baptisms which indicate a declaration of faith (Baptists call it "believer's baptism" as opposed to other branches of Christianity which baptize infants). According to Christianity Today, the SBC just "reported its largest annual decline in more than 130 years—a loss of 236,467 members."[\[1\]](#)

The negative numbers just keep coming. "The denomination is down to its 'lowest baptisms since 1946; lowest membership since 1990; lowest worship attendance since 1996,' [according](#)

to historical analysis from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. 'The true bad news is that when you put last year in the context of all previous years, it indicates the SBC is in the midst of a decline that shows no signs of either slowing down or turning around,' [said](#) Chuck Kelly, the seminary's president."[2](#)

The Southern Baptists are not alone and not the first Christians to see such a disheartening trend. Churchgoers are voting with their feet in alarming numbers. Are they, in part, being pulled away by unbelievers who want nothing to do with church? Probe has researched deeply the "[rise of the Nones](#)," referring to the fast-growing segment of the nation who do not affiliate with Christianity on surveys. They mark "None" when it comes to which faith they claim. These politically and ethically "moderate" or "liberal" folks are not atheistic or hostile to religion. They simply don't think about it. And as someone quipped, the opposite of good is not evil, it's indifference.

It seems that some of the former believers among the Nones are likely represented by the two of five Americans who believe that "when it comes to what happens in the country today, 'people of faith' (42%) and 'religion' (46%) are part of the problem."[3](#) More likely, the general malaise regarding eternal destiny or religion of the non-affiliated Nones has infected tepid churchgoers in a silent, insidious way. The spirit of the age whispers, "Meh, go to church? Not relevant. No one believes that stuff anymore. At least I don't have to go to church to believe it."

Yet, efforts to make the faith culturally relevant have often fallen flat. Christian talk show host Janet Mefferd wonders what's gone wrong with Southern Baptist churches in this regard. She wryly asks, Wasn't the infusion of more cultural conversation, increased societal sensitivity led by Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission Russell Moore supposed to plug the leak, staunch the flow of members out of Southern Baptist

churches? Weren't closed-door conversations with gay rights leaders designed to open the church doors to those who feel marginalized? Formal denominational statements on Earth care and animal rights were supposed to turn things around, says the conservative and Baptist-friendly Mefferd. "What happened? I don't know. But more evangelism and less conversation would be in order."

Mefferd echoes Southern Baptist strategists and leaders. "It's clear that evangelism and discipleship are waning," Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, an SBC affiliate which produces the [Annual Church Profile] report being discussed. "I don't believe it is due to the lack of opportunities, though. Instead, there is a lack of engagement."

Yes, evangelism and discipleship are central to the Great Commission and are undeniably tiptop biblical values, commands really. However, we no longer live in a milieu where agreed-upon notions of sin and evil exist-or even that such truth claims could possibly be valid for all. Simply launching new evangelism campaigns and standard discipling programs doesn't seem to work anymore. Massive work on the worldview level, including apologetics to challenge underlying misinformation and beliefs, coupled with winsome and culturally engaged and convinced Christians are vital to even getting the gospel a hearing. My work on campus tells me that you must establish absolute truth before any claim to Christ's offer is anything other than "he said, she said, just what grandma believed."

So maybe the issue isn't membership rolls and baptisms, though these are helpful measures. Forget church growth programs with the lowest-common-denominator appeal using culture-copycatted branding. Joyful and hopeful Christ-followers with studied answers to common objections will make an eternity of a difference. We see this happening now.

Pollster-turned-activist George Barna and his namesake Barna

Group “collaborated on the 2014 book Churchless to further examine the nation’s unchurched community.” Co-author and Barna Group President David Kinnaman commented on the phenomenon that a growing number of Americans don’t attend church but used to do so. “This fact should motivate church leaders and attenders to examine how to make appropriate changes—not for the sake of enhancing attendance numbers but to address the lack of life transformation that would attract more people to remain an active part.”[\[4\]](#)

Pastors and laymen alike, perhaps the studies by The Barna Group and others are right: it’s time to dispense with programs that speak only to us, stop relying on “professional Christians,” and become the informed, sacrificial, calling-driven, supernaturally joyous ones the Lord Jesus saved us to be. Now that’s relevant! Build that and they may just come back.

## Notes

1. Smietana, Bob, “As Church Plants Grow, Southern Baptists Disappear”, *Christianity Today*, accessed 6-13-2017, [www.christianitytoday.com/news/2015/june/southern-baptist-decline-baptism-church-plant-sbc.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2015/june/southern-baptist-decline-baptism-church-plant-sbc.html)
  2. Kate Shellnutt, “Hundreds of New Churches Not Enough to Satisfy Southern Baptists”, *Christianity Today*, accessed 6-13-2017, [www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/june/southern-baptist-convention-churches-baptisms-sbc-acp.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/june/southern-baptist-convention-churches-baptisms-sbc-acp.html)
  3. Stone, Roxanne, Editor-in-Chief, “Who’s (Still) in Church”, *BarnaTrends 2017: What’s New and What’s Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture*, 150.
  4. Stone, 148.
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# **“Is It Wrong to Baptize in the Name of Jesus?”**

**Did the Apostles baptize wrong in the Book of Acts since they baptized in the name of Jesus?**

There is a debate that says believers must be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28: 19) rather than in the name of Jesus only as the Book of Acts records. The Jesus-only people are also modalists which means they do not believe in the Trinity but in Jesus Only, hence they baptize only in his name. The confusion lies in the different formulas for baptism in Matthew and Acts. The solution is that either formula is acceptable since they are both Biblical. What is not acceptable is the modalist theology behind the Jesus Only belief that denies the personhood of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Lawrence Terlizzese, Ph.D.

Posted Feb. 29, 2012

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# **“Should My Husband Get Baptized If He Still Wants to Get Drunk?”**

My husband is now a newly born again believer and wants to get baptized. My concern is that even though he has asked Jesus to be his savior and wants to get baptized, he won't give up getting drunk. He says it is his “one thing” he isn't ready to

**give up. Should he still get baptized?**

I'm so glad you wrote! What's your understanding of what it means to be baptized? It is an outward symbol of an inward reality: that he has trusted in Christ, is now a member of His family, and wants to testify that a very important change has happened inside.

It doesn't mean he has his act together. <smile>

You can read all the way through the New Testament and not find any specifications for being baptized other than deciding to follow Christ, and no reasons *not* to be baptized. As your husband walks with the Lord and starts to realize that the abundant life starts with Jesus living inside him, He will provide a different way of viewing getting drunk. But that's going to take time, and I want to encourage you, one wife to another, to let the Lord be in charge of the timing of that dealing with that behavior. There are reasons he gets drunk that God is fully aware of, and will deal with at the right time.

Please, give your husband a break. . . and a baptism party! ☐ Celebrate this great, great news. . . and let the Holy Spirit be the Holy Spirit. He knows all about your husband's drinking. You pray, and trust God.

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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*After reading this article on our website, this wise wife wrote to me:*

Twenty-six years ago, my husband and I started going to a local church sometimes. God had been calling us to Him for some time, and at that point I fully committed my life to Him. My husband was born again when a man from church took the time to befriend my husband and explain the gospel to him. My

husband continued drinking (I didn't only because I was pregnant).

I didn't say anything to him, but he later told me that he started hiding from me how much he was drinking because he was feeling guilty. One day our pastor stopped by with his family when they were out for a bike ride, and my husband offered him a beer! I was mortified; I didn't know much about being a Christian, but I did know that it wasn't socially acceptable to offer a pastor a beer!

Thank God for that pastor, though, and the people of that church who welcomed us and took a genuine interest in us. The pastor graciously declined with "no thanks" but continued visiting and didn't make my husband feel like a leper or give him a lecture. Not too long after that, an elder of the church encouraged us to start coming to Sunday School Bible study classes instead of just worship services. Because my husband felt comfortable with the pastor, he talked to him about this. He told our pastor, "I want to come to church more often, but I like drinking beer and don't want to stop, and I don't want people to judge me." The pastor told him, "Whether or not you should be drinking beer is between you and God, and no one at church is going to say anything to you about it. Don't let that thought keep you from coming to church or growing closer to God."

So we started going to Bible studies and became more involved in the church. Within a few months, just after our son was born, my husband quit drinking. It happened this way: My husband later told me that he had been feeling the conviction that he shouldn't be drinking and he knew that he didn't want his son to grow up like he had, with an alcoholic father. But he liked beer so much that he kept ignoring the thoughts. One day when my husband was in the garage, he felt that conviction so strongly that he knelt down on the floor there in the garage and surrendered himself completely to God, and vowed not to drink again. He quit that very day, and God helped him

keep that vow. He came into the house to find me, very emotional, and told me what had happened.

I can't take credit for being wise enough not to say anything to him about drinking; that had to be the Lord's work. But I do think that because I didn't say anything to him about it, the struggle stayed between my husband and God and didn't become a power struggle between him and me. I know enough now to know that a wife should not attempt to be her husband's conscience on matters such as this; God calls her to love and honor her husband.

God does not always use the same timeline or the same routes with everyone, and not everyone is equally responsive to God. But that woman can be sure that God IS working with her husband, just as He is working with her, and that His Spirit is dealing with anything He wants her husband to change. She can trust God enough to leave the conviction to Him, and to guide her in what her responses should be in difficult decisions (such as if he wants her to drink with him) and how to honor her husband without compromising her beliefs. I will pray for this woman and pray that her husband will respond to the Lord and fully commit his life to Him.

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## **“Why Did Jesus Have to be Baptized?”**

**If Jesus is truly God, then why did he have to be baptized?**

You ask a very good question. Indeed, John the Baptist also wondered about baptizing Jesus (Matthew 3:14). John's baptism



was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). But Jesus had no need for repentance or forgiveness (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5). Why, then, did Jesus seek to be baptized by John?

There may be a clue in how Jesus responds in Matthew 3:15: "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Baptism is a form of identification. Although Jesus had no sin to repent of, He seems to have wanted to be identified with John's message of the need for repentance. This seems to be supported by Jesus' own message (Matthew 4:17; Mark 2:15; etc.). Also, Jesus probably wanted to be identified with those receiving John's baptism, namely, sinners. After all, Jesus came to be identified with us, and to die as a substitute for our sins (see 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Interestingly, Jesus' death and resurrection, which is the basis for our forgiveness, is linked with baptism in passages like Romans 6:3-4.

At any rate, these are some of the reasons why I think Jesus sought to be baptized by John. I hope this information helps a bit.

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn

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## **"How Did John the Baptist Get**

# the Idea to Baptize People?"

Where did John the Baptist get the idea to dunk people in water and call it baptism? It can't be the same as our baptism today, depicting the death, burial, and resurrection; that hadn't happened yet. He preached baptism for the remittance of sin. But where did the idea come from?

Thanks for your question. D.S. Dockery has a good discussion of this issue in his article on "Baptism" in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [eds. Joel Green and Scot McNight (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 55-58].

Although the Jews practiced a form of proselyte baptism, "there is no clear evidence prior to A.D. 70 that proselytes underwent baptism as a requirement of conversion" (Ibid., 56). Dockery presents the following arguments against the view that Jewish proselyte baptism served as the model for John's baptism (ibid., 56):

1. There is no clear reference to Jewish proselyte baptism in the OT, Philo, or Josephus.
2. Jewish proselyte baptism was self-administered; John's baptism was administered by John.
3. There are grammatical differences between how the term "baptism" is used in the NT and how it is used in texts mentioning Jewish proselyte baptism.
4. John baptized *Jews*, conditioned on their repentance; Jewish proselyte baptism was only for Gentiles.

But if John did not get this idea from Jewish proselyte baptism, where did he get it? Dockery thinks a more likely borrowing occurred from the Qumran community. He does not, however, commit John to having been an Essene. In support of his thesis, Dockery offers the following arguments (Ibid., 57):

1. Both the Qumran community and John stressed the

- importance of repentance in relation to baptism.
2. Both viewed their ministries in terms of Isaiah 40:3.
  3. Both baptized Jewish people.

However, there was one important distinction between the Qumran community and John regarding baptism: the Qumran rite was self-administered and practiced frequently, while John's baptism was administered by John and was a one-time rite of initiation.

Thus, Dockery believes John got his idea for water baptism from the Qumran community. Of course, it's important to note that if John originally received this idea from Qumran, he nonetheless revised and adapted it to fit his own unique purpose and calling as the one who was preparing the Jewish nation to receive her Messiah. Also, it's important to remember that this is simply one scholar's expert opinion. I happen to think it a good one, but as he himself observes, "...the background of John's baptism remains fiercely debated" (Ibid., 56).

God bless you,

Michael Gleghorn  
Probe Ministries