

# Church History: Self-Deception 1850 –

(Part 4)

## What is the state of religion in the West?

The state of religion in the West is very uncertain. Some believe that Christianity's influence upon culture is a thing of the past. Many describe the West as "post-Christian." Still others seem to think that the Evangelical church has won, in the sense that people today would identify Evangelical beliefs as "Christian," as distinguished from liberalism. Others, fully informed about declining numbers, sense that North America is posed for another great work of the Spirit.

As the twentieth century began, conservative Christians struggled with emerging progressive or liberal Christians who appeared to be capturing the culture. Progressive ideas: the moral cause and vision of Jesus without being distracted by distorting doctrine and liturgy, or, while the outward expression may be different for Buddhists and Baptists the inner religious experience was the same at root, seemed to capture much of the culture of Northern Europe and North America.

Technology: television, computers, and smart phones, is part of a globalizing tendency that is changing business and creating a common culture, especially for young people. With capacity for good or bad, it may just epitomize and aggravate the self-centered culture already noted.

## What is the modern understanding of secularization?

A central notion for today's understanding is that one can clearly distinguish what is religious from what is non-religious. Today the knowledge of God is thought to be an intellectual or academic venture that requires neither conversion nor even belief in God! In today's world secularism refers to movements that wish to eliminate or restrict the influence of religion. . . the hostility of today's atheists and secularists calls for the removal of religion and even the removal of Christianity from the public record.

Perhaps as disturbing as the hostility to faith is an indifference to Christianity. The culture at large seems not to notice or care; the language of the Bible that once shaped discourse of educated citizens seems missing from everyday life. Numerous studies show that believers have less knowledge and commitment to key Christian teaching than ever before. Those who still defend the doctrines or teachings of Christianity ironically offer secular explanations, and co-opt Christianity into a God-sponsored version of self-help therapy.

## How have Evangelicals responded?

One response was rooted in a speculative anticipation of the end of time, or at least the beginning of the end times. The contemporary world was seen as increasingly lost and having little to do with God's plan for the

church. Because of the increasing evil and moral failure, they believed that removal of the church, or Rapture, would happen very soon.

The next approach was to battle secular forces on political and cultural turfs. Jerry Falwell was pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, but after creating a political action group called the Moral Majority in 1979, he became the first prominent spokesman for the so-called Religious Right. The label stood for a coalition of fundamentalist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Catholic Christians, driven by concern for the decline in American morality, who had become extremely active in the political arenas. The passion of the Religious Right lay in their perception that the United States was falling under the influence of secular humanism and that traditional family values were under attack in the media and the public schools. Several explosive national issues seemed to ignite this new conservative reaction. **First:** in 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the Roe v. Wade case - the right to terminate pregnancy by abortion. **Second:** in 1978 a ballot proposition in California tried to expand legal protection of homosexuals. **Third:** the battle over the Equal Rights amendment to the Constitution. Falwell was opposed to the wording of the amendment that it would allow homosexual marriages and adoptions and would allow women to be drafted into the armed services. These three issues – abortion, homosexual rights, and feminism – served to mobilize Conservative Christians for battles in the political arena, soon to expand to include other moral and political issues.

A third approach involves another change of course or strategy. Numerous Evangelicals sought to be less confrontational and would attempt to engage the new changing culture on its own terms. These churchmen observed that they ministered within the age of individual self-expression. They created user-friendly churches that made religion almost totally a matter of personal choice. Desiring to evangelize, practitioners performed market analysis in an effort to offer an experience that would meet with the approval of the target audience. Some fashioned an experience that would be comfortable to a religious seeker. A great variety of churches adopted a practical self-help approach; a special version of allegory was embraced to extract techniques from the Bible, which suddenly became a manual for success in life.

The megachurch phenomenon illustrates the third approach of seeking relevance. These large churches grew in part because they shed the negative image of denominational Christianity and appealed to popular religious tastes. The appeal to popular taste was revealed in several common characteristics: first, these congregations seldom carried a denominational label. They much preferred "chapel", "center" or "community" on the sign out front. Second: the worship in these large congregations was marked by fast paced and enthusiastic popular religious music. Third, they were built around the attractive ministry of a magnetic preacher who possessed a winsome personality. The sermons stressed the Bible's application to day-to-day life.

Many megachurches continue to flourish, but many others have plateaued. Some seek a new approach that will appeal to the emerging generation. . . .emphasizing feelings and affections rather than rationality and linear thought, on personal experience over propositional truths, on inclusion rather than exclusion, and on participation in corporate worship in contrast to lost-in-the-crowd, megachurch individualism

### Has this stemmed the tide of Secularization?

Sobering signs show that conservative evangelical efforts (to prepare for spiritual rescue from a dying world or to reclaim a Christian character for the nation by political victory or to connect with the lost culture) have not stemmed the tide of secularization. Taken together, numerous signs indicate that “old-time religion” may be moving swiftly toward a minority status within the culture. Now, one in five Americans claims to have no religious affiliation; for adults under age thirty, the number jumps to one in three. Also conservative Christians have lost ground on the three initiatives targeted by the Religious Right: abortion, homosexual rights and feminism. Legal limitation upon same-sex marriage received serious damage in June, 2013. California’s Proposition Eight and Defense of Marriage Act were both set aside in Supreme Court action. “Church History” Bruce L Shelley pp. 481-489

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### How is culture described in the Last Days? II Timothy 3:1-5

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### What charge is given Timothy? II Timothy 4:1-5

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“I know that it has long been fashionable to despise a very earnest and pathetic way of preaching, and they only have been valued as preachers who have shown the greatest extent of learning, strength of reason, and correctness of method and language. But I humbly conceive it has been for want of understanding or duly considering human nature that such preaching has been thought to have the greatest tendency to answer the ends of preaching, and the experience of the present and past ages abundantly confirms the same. And increase in speculative knowledge in divinity is not what is so much needed by our people as something else.

Men may abound in this sort of light, and have no heat. How much has there been of this sort of knowledge, in the Christian world, in this age! Was there ever an age wherein strength and penetration of reason, extent of learning, exactness of distinction, correctness of style, and clearness of expression, did so abound? And yet, was there ever an age, wherein there has been so little sense of the evil of sin, so little love to God, heavenly-mindedness, and holiness of life, among the professors of the true religion? Our people do not so much need to have their heads stored as to have their hearts touched, and they stand in the greatest need of that sort of preaching which has the greatest tendency to do this.” “Jonathan Edwards” Iain H Murray pp. 126,127

“. . . they understood the Bible to teach that, as a general rule, conviction precedes conversion. . . In the words of Robert Bolton: A man must feel himself in misery, before he will go about to find a remedy; be sick before he will seek a physician; be in prison before he will seek for a pardon. A sinner must be weary of his former wicked ways before he will have recourse to Jesus Christ for refreshing. He must be sensible of his spiritual poverty, beggary, and slavery under the devil, before he thirst kindly for heavenly righteousness, and willingly take up Christ’s sweet and easy yoke. He must be cast down, confounded, condemned, a cast away, and lost in himself, before he look about for a Savior.” “Jonathan Edwards” Iain H Murray p. 128

### What instructions are given the Thessalonians? I Thess. 4:1-12

v.1,7 \_\_\_\_\_

v.3 \_\_\_\_\_

v.9 \_\_\_\_\_

v.11,12 \_\_\_\_\_

### How are Thessalonian believers encouraged? I Thess: 4:13-18

v.13,14 \_\_\_\_\_

v.16 \_\_\_\_\_

v.17 \_\_\_\_\_