

Correlation is Not Causation: Why Theology is Not What Makes Churches Grow

In this article, I will seek to answer whether theological conservatism and strictness play a vital role in denominational switching, as well as what factors cause churches to grow numerically. In the end, the idea that liberal theologies *cause* a deterioration in mainline Protestantism, while conservative theologies produce growth, is an oversimplification of the relevant factors that account for congregational development. Though theological conservatism tends to *correlate* with numerical expansion, it does not do so consistently and in all cases. Nonetheless, correlation does not equate to causation. Conservatism and strictness are merely two among a myriad of other influences that are present among growing churches, including (most notably) higher birth rates, higher youth retention, and a focus on evangelistic efforts.

Is Theology & Strictness the Principal Factor?

To begin, there is no question that in North America, mainline Protestant denominations have declined numerically while conservative evangelical churches have steadily increased since the 1960s.¹ However, it is not immediately apparent why this trend would be the case. According to one prominent theory, articulated here by Rodney Stark, “Americans mostly change churches in search of a deeper, more compelling faith,” implying that stricter evangelical denominations are more spiritually vigorous than the ineffective traditions of mainline liberalism.² There appears to be support for this speculation. A small group of researchers in Canada found that theological conservatism, oftentimes associated with greater moral strictness, was a significant element in predicting church growth, whereas theological liberalism was associated with churches in decline.³ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark discovered the same thing when they found

¹ For brief reviews of this trend in both Canada and the United States, see Kurt Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 276-79; Kevin N. Flatt, *After Evangelicalism: The Sixties and the United Church of Canada* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 229-49; Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 21-22; Gregory Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), 4, 8, accessed January 9, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>.

² See Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 21-25, 29-36; quote appears on p. 21.

³ It is important to note that the researchers compared churches within the same mainline Protestant denominations in the same geographical area (southern Ontario). Some of the congregations exhibited more

that even theologically conservative churches associated with mainline denominations grew while their liberal counterparts from the same denomination weakened.⁴

One of the most common theories to explain this phenomenon is known as the “strictness thesis,” which first appeared in the 1972 book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*. Here, Dean Kelley argued that stricter churches, a consequence of their conservative theology, accounted for the numerical growth of evangelical congregations.⁵ Laurence Iannaccone later supported this thesis when he argued that stricter congregations eliminate the more noncommittal members in favor of those attendees who can produce the greatest remunerations for the overall group.⁶ There seems to be support for this thesis, as well. For many evangelical churches, behaviors such as viewing pornography, abortion, homosexuality, premarital cohabitation and sexual relations, gambling, and immodest apparel are either forbidden or highly discouraged. Liberal churches, on the other hand, tend not to be as austere. Conservative churches also expect greater participation, creating a culture that dejects, marginalizes, stigmatizes, or suppresses those members who lack the same kind of ardent investment.⁷

Not surprisingly, theorists have argued that conservative theologies are intricately linked to stricter (“high tension”) churches, oftentimes being the underlying cause for other growth-related factors, including a congregation’s sense of absolutism and missionary zeal. Consequently, committed religionists tend to desire conservative theologies because, among other things, it promotes stricter adherence to the religion and provides a more satisfying, convictional, and self-assured message that abounds in feelings of security.⁸ According to one

conservative beliefs while other churches exhibited more liberal beliefs though they were part of the same mainline denomination. See David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, “Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy,” *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): 515-41.

⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 276-79.

⁵ Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁶ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 5 (March 1994): 1180-11. Cf. Roger Finke, Matt Bahr, and Christopher P. Scheitle, “Toward Explaining Congregational Giving,” *Social Science Research* 35, no. 3 (September 2006): 620-41.

⁷ Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 30-33.

study, congregants were attracted to certain churches specifically because the pastors expressed certainty about the absolute truthfulness of their preaching message.⁹ This confidence in the rightness of a particular belief system is especially related to proselytizing behaviors, which is a significant factor in church growth. Conservative churches, rather than conservative theologies, are simply the most conducive environments in promoting higher rates of evangelism because of a larger and more explicit sense of mission and purpose toward the external world. Liberal churches, on the other hand, tend to prioritize internal discipleship over evangelism, thereby contributing to stagnant growth rates.¹⁰ Surveys confirm these speculations. Of those polled, 44% of conservative Protestants claim to have shared their faith with strangers in the past month whereas only 19% of liberal Protestants claim the same thing, signifying that conservative denominations may work harder at inviting and retaining membership.¹¹

The overall implication of this “[conservative] strictness thesis” is that a church’s “market value” on absolute truth claims, likely the motivating cause for ascetic and moral strictness, has a higher cost-to-benefit ratio. In other words, congregants may come to suppose a church’s religious beliefs are true simply because the theology is more conservatively strict and, thus, exhibits greater certainty in its theological and behavioral dictates.¹² The potential for eternal benefits outweighs the temporary costs of piety, causing believers to seek out churches that can secure eternal rewards better than others.¹³ William Hendricks’ book, *Exit Interviews*, concludes that people leave the church because their longing for certainty and genuineness,

⁸ For these correlations, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 141-68; Jeremy N. Thomas and Daniel V. A. Olson, “Testing the Strictness Thesis and Competing Theories of Congregational Growth,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 4 (December 2010): 619-39; Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, 79-81; and Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 248-53.

⁹ Joseph B. Tamney and Stephen D. Johnson, “The Popularity of Strict Churches,” *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 3 (March 1998): 209-23.

¹⁰ Cf. the research findings in C. Kirk Hadaway, “Is Evangelistic Activity Related to Church Growth?,” in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 169-87 and Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, “Theology Matters,” 518-19, 523-25.

¹¹ Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 25.

¹² See the [first](#) and [second](#) blogs to this series for a discussion on the rigidity of conservative beliefs compared with the theological flexibility of liberalism.

¹³ Thomas and Olson, “Testing the Strictness Thesis,” 619-39; Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, 80; Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 216.

coupled with a desire to escape boring worship services, ultimately forces them to search for meaning elsewhere. Nonetheless, theology was still important to the people leaving church.¹⁴ As Stark concludes about theology's relationship to liberal decline, "The strict churches—those that demand much of their members—are the ones that are flourishing, while the more permissive and accommodating churches are falling by the wayside....strict churches grow because they give greater satisfaction to their members."¹⁵

Data on Denominational Switching

Interestingly enough, "denominational switching" is actually quite common in the United States.¹⁶ During the 2007 Pew Forum survey, 44% of American Christians switched from one religious tradition to another. More precisely, 11% of current Catholics switched to Catholicism from a different tradition (or no affiliation at all), and the same was true for 23% of Orthodox believers and 90% of other Christian groups (not including Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses). Overall, 29% of Protestants switched from one Protestant tradition to a different Protestant denomination.¹⁷ Similarly, in a 2016 Pew Forum survey, almost half (49%) of American adults "have looked for a new church" at some point in their life. Among those who claim to attend church regularly, roughly 30% searched for a new church in the last five years.¹⁸ Nonetheless, as indicated from the 2007 poll, the majority of those raised conservative merely switched to another evangelical tradition. Liberal Christians, on the other hand, were more evenly split where approximately the same number of those raised in a mainline tradition retained their liberal affiliation as those who switched to a conservative tradition.¹⁹

¹⁴ William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People are Leaving the Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1993), 260-63.

¹⁵ Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 29.

¹⁶ The phrase "denominational switching" here refers to any form of alteration in a Christian believer's religious tradition, including transferring from a liberal mainline denomination to a conservative evangelical tradition (and *visa versa*), as well as substituting one liberal or conservative church for another denomination within the same liberal or conservative tradition.

¹⁷ Luis Lugo, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation; Diverse and Dynamic* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, Feb. 2008) 5, 25-28, accessed July 10, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/05/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>.

¹⁸ Alan Cooperman, *Choosing a New Church or House of Worship: Americans Look for Good Sermons, Warm Welcome* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, Aug. 23, 2016), 11, 14, accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2016/08/Choosing-Congregations-08-19-FULL-PDF-for-web-2.pdf>.

Especially noteworthy is the 2007 data that suggests only 2.4% of American adults converted to the Methodist denomination (a traditionally liberal affiliation) whereas almost twice as many (4.5%) had converted to the Baptist denomination (a traditionally conservative institution). Of all the evangelical groupings, Baptists saw the most significant increase in transfers to their conservatism, followed by nondenominational (3.9%) and Pentecostal (2.6%) assemblages (also traditionally conservative), while other Protestant groupings had only marginal conversions from other affiliations.²⁰ Thus, there appears to be support for the notion that conservative conventions have a greater appeal than liberal connections since conservatives rarely switch to the liberal side, but liberals oftentimes (though not always) switch to the conservative side. Hence, in 2014, only the evangelical tradition had a positive gain (1.5%) of adherents from other traditions (or no affiliation at all). The liberal groupings of Protestants, on the other hand, experienced significant losses (-4.3%) with no overall positive increase in followers. Generally, both Catholics and Mainline Christians have lost more of their members due to religious switching than they have gained through conversion, but conservative evangelicalism is just the opposite (gaining more through religious switching than losing).²¹ In connection with the “strictness thesis,” the question becomes: does evangelicalism flourish because liberals are switching to conservatism?

Are Liberals Turning to Evangelicalism? Not Really.

In 2007, the relocation rates between liberal and conservative denominations were almost identical. 31% of current evangelicals had converted from a non-conservative Protestant denomination, and 30% of current mainline Christians had converted from a non-liberal Protestant tradition.²² The most recent statistics, however, now seem to indicate that more evangelicals are switching to mainline Protestantism than the reverse. As discussed in the previous [blog](#), most mainline Christians (26%) who deconvert away from liberalism abandon their religious affiliation altogether. Only 19% switch to an evangelical tradition while almost half (45%) of those raised in the liberal tradition retain their mainline identity. Evangelicals are

¹⁹ Lugo, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, 31-32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-28.

²¹ Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape* 13, 33-44.

²² Lugo, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, 28.

quite similar. 65% raised evangelical retain their conservative heritage. Of those evangelicals who switch to another religious tradition, 12% become mainline Protestants while 15% become unaffiliated with any religious tradition. Currently, only 14% of those now professing to be evangelical say they were once raised liberal whereas 20% of current liberals say they were once raised conservative, indicating a potential shift in how American Christians associate with evangelicalism.²³ Likewise, 39% of evangelicals and 26% of mainline Protestants said they searched for a new church within the last five years. Of those who did search for a new church at some point in their life, both evangelicals and mainline Protestants were evenly divided about whether they considered a tradition outside their current denomination. 47% of evangelicals and 52% of mainline Christians contemplated switching while 49% of evangelicals and 45% of mainline only considered churches within the same tradition.²⁴

The data from these national polls depict a different understanding of denominational switching than the presumed belief about conservative dominance: liberal Christians are not deconverting to evangelical churches any more than conservative Christians are converting to mainline denominations. Attempts to switch denominations on either side are infrequent and are equally divided between those who switch traditions and those who retain the same denomination. Thus, the idea that evangelicalism grows because there is a mass exodus of disillusioned liberals is simply an over exaggeration of the actual data. In reality, many (if not most) conservative-leaning members of liberal churches tend to remain inside mainline traditions in an effort to transform the denomination from within their own ranks rather than switch churches or splinter into rival denominations.²⁵ In fact, according to Mark Chavez, the surge of liberal Protestants switching to conservative churches started to decelerate precisely when conservative churches began to grow. Barely 10% of mainline Christians born after 1970 switch to an evangelical congregation.²⁶

²³ Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape* 13, 33-44.

²⁴ Cooperman, *Choosing a New Church or House of Worship*, 14, 19.

²⁵ See Jennifer McKinney and Roger Finke, "Reviving the Mainline: An Overview of Clergy Support for Evangelical Renewal Movements," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2002): 771-74.

²⁶ Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 87-88.

Hence, of the 61% of mainline Protestants who have searched for a new congregation, 45% did so simply because they moved while 13% cited interpersonal conflicts within the congregation. Contrary to the standard narrative, evangelicals actually have the largest proportion of their congregations (67%) leave for a new church, but the majority of them (49%) cited moving as the reason why. 18% of evangelicals left their previous church because of interpersonal problems while 26% cited other reasons, which may have included other forms of internal conflict, personal reasons, social or practical issues, and doctrinal beliefs (though it is unclear how much doctrinal beliefs affected their decision to leave).²⁷

Why Theology is Not the Main Reason for Church Growth

Though theology and theology-related characteristics enjoy widespread attention, national polling data seems to suggest that theology is not as important of a factor as some theorists would like to believe. For example, of the 49% of American adults who actively looked for a new church, the vast majority (34%) said they did so simply because they had moved. Among evangelicals and mainline Protestants, almost half (49% and 45% respectively) said they looked for a new church for the same reason. Interestingly, 11% said they looked for a new church because they disagreed with the clergy, 7% cited other problems with their old church, and 5% claimed they had a change in their beliefs. Only 3% cited problems with their old church's theology as the reason for looking elsewhere. 3% were just dissatisfied with their old church more generally, and 1% had issues with the leadership. Likewise, 3% said they were exploring new beliefs, 1% stated their beliefs had evolved, and 1% cited an actual change in their religion or denomination. Just as many people searched for a new place of worship for social (3%) or practical reasons (3%).²⁸ In other words, the reasons why people leave their church almost never have anything to do with theology or doctrine. They have to do with more practical and interpersonal concerns of a social nature.

²⁷ Cooperman, *Choosing a New Church or House of Worship*, 11-13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5, 11-13.

Religious Principles, Practices, and Priorities of Most Christians

There's no clearer indication that theology has little to do with church growth than the actual principles, practices, and priorities of Christians themselves. According to a recent Barna poll, "only 17 percent of Christians who consider their faith important and attend church regularly actually have a biblical worldview." In fact, many of the beliefs that practicing Christians hold "about the way the world is and how it ought to be" are unique to nonbiblical "worldviews" (though it is questionable whether some of these beliefs are entirely antithetical to Christianity). For instance, 38% of active Christians identified with explicitly Muslim teachings, 61% with "New Spirituality," 36% with Marxism, and 29% with secularist ideas. Not surprisingly, those Christians exposed to more cultural and religious diversity, such as city-dwellers and younger generations, were less likely to maintain a strictly "biblical" worldview.²⁹ For instance, 28% of Christians surveyed agree that "all people pray to the same god or spirit, no matter what name they use for that spiritual being," and 20% agree that "meaning and purpose comes from working hard to earn as much as possible so you can make the most of life." 23% strongly agree with the statement, "What is morally right or wrong depends on what an individual believes."³⁰

Regardless of these particular ideas (or the validity of Barna's methodology and conclusions), the behavioral patterns of Christians do not suggest theology is a major priority. It is interesting that eight out of ten Christian believers cite non-religious and non-spiritual goals, such as family happiness, financial security, and successful careers, as the single most important

²⁹ This author recognizes the difficulty of labeling any post-Enlightenment worldview as "biblical" considering it is almost impossible to maintain every biblical belief about the world in light of current scientific knowledge. An example would be how some biblical authors understood the function of human internal organs. "A number of human organs were held to have psychical functions, including the kidneys, which were seen to be the center of the affections and hidden motives. The kidneys could be troubled (Job 19:27; Ps 73:21), be 'tested' by God (Jer 11:20) and rejoice (Prov 23:16). The kidneys also instructed (Ps 16:7), a concept known from Ugaritic texts" (John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Jer. 20:12).

³⁰ For more details, see "Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians," *Barna Group*, 5/09/2017, accessed July 18, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/competing-worldviews-influence-todays-christians>. According to Barna, a "biblical worldview" maintains "that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today." Of course, this definition of a "biblical worldview" is questionable and highly biased toward an evangelical perspective, erroneously implying that those traditions outside evangelicalism are not "biblical."

thing they would like to accomplish in life. Of those who listed some type of spiritual growth as a high priority (20%), half cited mundane objectives, such as maintaining faith in God or knowing that they are “saved.”³¹ Even Stark cited a 2007 Gallup poll, which concluded that 84% of American adults, both liberal and conservatives, believe their life already has real purpose regardless of their denominational affiliation. In fact, Stark admits, “In that sense, everyone’s current denomination seems to be a satisfactory ‘fit.’”³² As George Barna remarks, “Three of every five adult Christians we surveyed told us they want to have a deep commitment to the Christian faith, but they are not involved in any intentional effort to grow spiritually.”³³ This lack of intentionality for a richer faith or greater spiritual commitment conflicts with the idea that Christians deliberately change churches for the purpose of joining a more theologically conservative denomination. These statistics alone suggest that “a deeper, more compelling faith” is not really a high priority for many Christians.

Similarly, yearning for a stricter spiritual life appears inconsistent with the low number of Christians who actually take measurable steps to increase their spiritual development. While 68% claim to participate in a small group, only 24% participate in Sunday schools, 15% have a spiritual mentor, and 11% attend classes designed to enhance spiritual maturity. When asked to identify personal spiritual goals, the majority of Christians (60%) were unable to do so. Of the 40% who identified a spiritual ambition, only 20% of believers could provide a specific goal they would like to achieve, whereas the other 20% simply offered vague concepts and ideas (e.g. “to become a better Christian;” “to grow spiritually”). 30% of Christians confessed to having no plan or process in place to achieve their spiritual goals. Very few of the respondents were able or willing to offer more than one spiritual goal, and less than one out of five Christians were able to define “spiritual success” beyond a solitary component of personal maturation. Ultimately, less than 18% of Christians stated that growing spiritually was their biggest ambition in life.³⁴ If theology, strictness, or a deeper faith were truly the cause for liberal decline, surely more Christians would claim to prioritize these objectives in their spiritual lives.

³¹ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 38-40.

³² Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 26-27.

³³ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 34-35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-42.

What Christians Actually Prioritize in Church

In actuality, when asked what characteristics they looked for in a new church, the vast majority (83%) of Christians cited the quality of the preaching as an important determiner in suitability, as well as feeling welcomed by church leadership (79%). Similarly, 74% said the style of services and 70% said the church's location were high priorities. There was no statistically significant mention of anything to do with theology, doctrines, or beliefs. In fact, of the 71% who said finding a new church was easy, only 5% said it was easy because they agreed with the church's theology, the rest cited elements relating to convenience and a sense of community as the reason why they chose their new church. Correspondingly, of the 49% of Americans who searched for a different church, only 7% cited their disagreement with theology as the reason why it was difficult to find a new congregation. The majority of those who found it difficult again cited problems relating to convenience and a sense of community, not theology.³⁵

These findings conflict with Thom Rainer's research, which indicates that 89% of those who transferred churches said that conservative, evangelical doctrines were an important factor in joining a church. The majority of respondents embraced certainty in religion and adamantly opposed churches that lacked conviction or compromised in orthodox teachings.³⁶ The problem with this study is its limited sample size and anecdotal nature. Instead of drawing conclusions from national polls and surveys, Rainer simply makes generalizations based on personal interviews with already-devoted, already-indoctrinated evangelicals. His conclusions derive from unrepresentative and biased data, selecting only the most committed Christians to survey, instead of proportionate and relevant demographics across multiple subclasses.

³⁵ Cooperman, *Choosing a New Church or House of Worship*, 15, 21-23. Of the 49% who searched for a new church, 28% said it was difficult, of which 26% said it was difficult due to concerns over theology. Hence, only 7.29% of the original 49% cited anything to do with theology.

³⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 125-37.

Other Factors Play a Role in Church Growth

According to the national polls above, the majority of people who left one church for another did so because they moved, and they chose their new church simply because it was the most convenient option. Theology played little to no role in these decisions. Therefore, when taking data samples from the top mainline denominations in the United States, one survey found that a congregation's beliefs and attitude did not substantially influence a particular church's growth or decline when other growth-related factors were considered, such as having an external orientation (e.g. evangelism), superior programming, and a climate that fostered thoughtfulness. Because these factors are equally possible in both conservative and liberal assemblies, both types of churches are just as likely to grow numerically regardless of their doctrinal stances.³⁷ Moreover, several studies have demonstrated that a church's level of strictness or conservatism, though positively correlated to membership commitment levels, may actually be illegitimate as an explanation for congregational devotion since a variety of churches share the same cross-denominational variables and characteristics. In fact, some have argued that the congregations which grew the fastest in the 1990s were not strict at all, though their theology was conservative.³⁸ Surveys appear to demonstrate the same thing when 36% of liberal Protestants claim to attend church weekly compared to 54% of their conservative counterparts, revealing that the level of commitment between the two is not as great a difference as expected with current membership enrollments.³⁹

Likewise, in a sampling of "Middletown" congregations, ascetic strictness positively correlated to growth only among lower-class members, but it negatively correlated amongst the more affluent congregants. The authors concluded that strictness may not even be a leading element to church growth at all.⁴⁰ Rather, an embrace of ascetic virtues and a strict rejection of

³⁷ Cf. Daniel V. A. Olson, "Congregational Growth and Decline in Indiana Among Five Mainline Denominations," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 208-24 and Michael J. Donahue and Peter L. Benson, "Belief Style, Congregational Climate, and Program Quality," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 225-40.

³⁸ For a review and discussion of these different studies, see Daniel V. A. Olson and Paul Perl, "Variations in Strictness and Religious Commitment Within and Among Five Denominations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 4 (December 2001): 757-64 and "Free and Cheap Riding in Strict, Conservative Churches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 2 (June 2005): 123-42.

³⁹ Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 18-19.

worldly vices may be the working-class' renouncement of upper-class privilege as a way to explain and cope with their lower socio-economic status.⁴¹ Even Stark and Finke admit that what each churchgoer considers "strict" is dependent upon a multitude of influences, including socio-economic factors, culture, gender, and ethnicity.⁴² Would not the same be true of each congregant's concept of "conservative theology"?

Not All "Conservative" Churches are Actually Conservative

While articles such as "Theology Matters" argue that conservative doctrines are strong factors in predicting church growth, the actual results of the surveys reveal that what constitutes a "conservative" or "liberal" congregation is quite subjective. Many of the churches deemed "liberal" held conservative viewpoints, and many of the "conservative" churches held less than evangelical dogmas. For example, growing churches were almost evenly divided over whether "all major religions are equally good and true." Only 52% of growing churches took the conservative position while 43% took a more liberal stance. Additionally, 34% of growing churches disagreed with the notion that "only those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ will receive eternal life" while 59% said they moderately or strongly agreed. Also among growing churches, 30% of congregants and 23% of clergy agreed with the liberal statement, "The Bible is the product of human thinking about God, so some of its teachings are wrong or misguided." 53% of clergy moderately or strongly disagreed with the statement, "The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally." In other words, the results from "Theology Matters" indicate that a significant number of congregants and clergy in so-called theologically "conservative" growing churches do not actually hold "conservative" beliefs in every area of doctrine. In many cases, upwards of one-half to two-fifths of a "conservative" church held liberal beliefs.⁴³ The

⁴⁰ Joseph B. Tamney et al., "Strictness and Congregational Growth in Middletown," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (September 2003): 363-75.

⁴¹ Joseph B. Tamney, *The Resilience of Conservative Religion: The Case of Popular, Conservative Protestant Congregations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 76.

⁴² Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 198.

⁴³ For a detailed breakdown of the survey results, see Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters," 523-29.

reality is that growing churches are much more diverse theologically, possessing a mixture of both conservative and liberal doctrines by both congregants and clergy.

The idea that evangelical churches grow because of their conservative beliefs, while mainline denominations wane because of their liberalism, is likely an oversimplification of a much more complex discussion. It is hard to imagine that multitudes of Americans congregate weekly in evangelical churches predominantly for their conservative doctrines, especially when realizing that a 2017 Gallup poll revealed only 24% of American adults believe the Bible is “the actual word of God, and is to be taken literally, word for word,” which is the hallmark of conservative theology. 47% understand the Bible to be divinely inspired but should not be taken literally, a distinctly ambiguous belief applicable to both liberals and conservatives. 26% of Americans, on the other hand, regard the Bible as little more than a book of fables, legends, and secular history.⁴⁴

The Real Reason(s) for Church Growth

The reality is that some theologically conservative churches do, in fact, decline numerically with increasingly lower membership and attendance rates.⁴⁵ As one example, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) reported that it lost 204,409 members in 2015 and another 236,467 in 2014, resulting in over one million fewer members in the Convention since 2006. Likewise, the SBC reported that it continues to experience steep drops in the number of baptisms performed each year.⁴⁶ At the same time, some liberal churches continue to thrive congregationally, which indicates that there are other factors influencing growth rates apart from mere theological divides over liberalism and conservatism.⁴⁷ The truth is that the decline of

⁴⁴ Lydia Saad, “Record Few Americans Believe Bible Is Literal Word of God,” *Gallup News Service*, 5/15/2017, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>.

⁴⁵ C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, “Growth and Decline in the Mainline,” in *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, New Directions*, ed. Charles H. Lippy, vol. 1, *Organized Religion Today* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 1-24; Chaves, *American Religion*, 92, 131n9; Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 78, 89.

⁴⁶ Cf. Russ Rankin, “SBC baptisms down amid other growth,” *Baptist Press*, April 17, 2007, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://www.bpnews.net/25408/sbc-baptisms-down-amid-other-growth> and Carol Pipes, “ACP: More churches reported; baptisms decline,” *Baptist Press*, June 07, 2016, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://www.bpnews.net/46989/acp-more-churches-reported-baptisms-decline>.

⁴⁷ See Kevin D. Dougherty, Brandon C. Martinez, and Gerardo Marti “Congregational Diversity and Attendance in a Mainline Protestant Denomination,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 4

liberal mainline Protestantism is an historical phenomenon much like it was for liberalism's incredible growth during the second-half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Its historical demise is most likely a collective reaction against liberal societal changes and influences from the 1960s, coupled with the fact that conservative churches have had higher birth rates and better membership retention than their liberal counterparts.⁴⁹ The actual factors that cause a particular church or whole denomination to grow (or decline) are, in reality, a complex system of interrelated congregational personalities and characteristics. For instance, strictness and conservatism are really only two features that often materialize alongside other dynamic influences that affect growth, such as the ability to retain a strong youth membership, innovative and joyful services, a robust focus on evangelism and charity, support for interreligious dialogue, and the belief that God is active in the life of the congregation.⁵⁰ In fact, one study reveals that conservative denominations tend to have higher birth rates, exposing that their female congregants produced more children at younger ages, which accounted for the vast majority of evangelical memberships. The same study shows that other factors play a role, such as the fact that conservative conversions to mainline groups have diminished while apostasy rates have increased among liberals. Remarkably, this study also demonstrates that the rate of mainline Protestants converting to conservative churches has had no significant effect on the overall numerical success of evangelical congregations.⁵¹

(December 2015): 668-83 and Jennifer March, "Reconsidering Mainline Decline: Contemporary Forms of Mainline Adaptation and Congregational Survival" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, 2006), 1-20.

⁴⁸ See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 763-84 and Hadaway and Marler, "Growth and Decline in the Mainline," 1-24.

⁴⁹ Cf. Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "New Church Development and Denominational Growth (1950-1988): Symptom or Cause?," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 47-86; Bruce A. Greer, "Strategies for Evangelism and Growth in Three Denominations (1965-1990)," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 87-111; and Norman M. Green and Paul W. Light, "Growth and Decline in an Inclusive Denomination: The ABC Experience," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 112-26.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters," 516-17; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 235-83; and Tamney and Johnson, "The Popularity of Strict Churches," 209-23. Cf. Thomas and Olson, "Testing the Strictness Thesis," 619-39.

⁵¹ Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 2 (September 2001): 468-500. Cf. Thomas and Olson, "Testing the Strictness Thesis," 636.

Ultimately, congregations that grow numerically display stronger institutional allegiances and emphasize mutual responsibility of evangelistic efforts among their members. They tend to avoid, or at least quickly resolve, internal conflict among its members, and have an overall fervent determination to flourish as a church. Likewise, older congregations fail to assimilate new members into their established systems, making younger churches more likely to grow than their older equivalents. Nonetheless, a congregation's eventual growth depends significantly, if not almost entirely, on the socio-economic demographics of its surrounding environment, as well as its outward focus toward the community.⁵² Theology almost never plays as important a role as some theorists speculate. Even the article, "Theology Matters," concludes that a myriad of factors is present in growing churches, not just theological conservatism:

Growing church congregants are more likely to agree that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose, and to identify evangelism as that purpose. Growing churches are more likely to emphasize youth programs and to use contemporary worship styles. They also tend to be younger, and to have younger congregants and slightly younger clergy....the age of clergy, the age of the church, the presence of past conflict in the church, and the age of congregants each had a significant negative effect on growth....We found a number of noteworthy demographic differences between growing and declining churches in our sample, namely that the declining churches tended to be older, and to have older clergy and congregants.⁵³

In the end, theological conservatism has little to no influence on denominational switching, and those who isolate this one cause suspiciously ignore the fact that highly conservative denominations are just as unstable as liberal ones. Geographical and sociopolitical isolation are potential factors that impact a church's numerical growth, in addition to people desiring the right religious fit for their desired commitment levels. Conservative churches will, by their nature, attract more dedicated members who attend more and help maintain denominational stability largely because of other factors, such as their attitude and relationship to society, evangelistic methods, and internal communal monitoring.⁵⁴ Psychologically, the socially conservative are

⁵² See the seven chapter analyses of congregational growth and decline in David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 135-240.

⁵³ Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters," 535, 538.

⁵⁴ C. Kirk Hadaway, "Denominational Switching and Membership Growth: In Search of a Relationship," *Sociological Analysis* 39, no. 4 (1978): 321-37.

predisposed to pursue church membership whereas the socially liberal exhibit a consumeristic disposition that does not expect or demand total allegiance to any religious affiliation.⁵⁵

The most predominant factor for predicting church growth is not theology but socioeconomic advantages and outreach. With access to higher education, reproductive choices and family planning, career opportunities, cost of living increases, and lifestyle choices comes the inevitable drop in birth rates among developed nations. Liberal denominations suffered the biggest drop in birth rates largely due to their members' educational and social achievements. At the same time, conservative churches have done a better job of "training" (i.e. indoctrinating) their children to follow the same religious tradition even into adulthood, as well as "training" their congregants to proselytize more.⁵⁶ As C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Marler conclude,

Birth rates fell for mainline Protestants and conservatives, but remained higher for conservatives.... The net result was ever-increasing average age and ever-decreasing numbers of children to pass on the tradition. The issue of retention is more likely related to a decline in religious socialization or a weakening of mainline acculturation than to the particular theological content of their tradition.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The simple truth is that American Christians, and likely most Christians globally, are just not theologically-minded enough to base their church attendance on anything more than external concerns, such as convenience, location, and social connectedness. The problem with many interpretations of the congregational demographic data is that researchers appear to confuse correlation with causation. While it is true that conservative churches, *at this point in history*, tend to outpace liberal ones, this fact reveals only a cursory correlation between beliefs and expansion, especially when researchers recognize that liberal decline is a social phenomenon imbedded in the contexts of the 1960s.⁵⁸ But correlation is not causation, and oversimplified explanations rarely enjoy universal application. There is no real evidence to suggest that

⁵⁵ See Penny Long Marler and David A. Roozen, "From Church Tradition to Consumer Choice: The Gallup Surveys of the Unchurched American," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 253-77.

⁵⁶ See Hadaway and Marler, "Growth and Decline in the Mainline," 1-24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁸ Cf. Marler and Hadaway, "New Church Development and Denominational Growth," 47-86.

conservative beliefs actually cause numerical growth or congregational commitment, especially when there is strong evidence to suggest that self-reported survey data may not accurately reflect the actual status of church attendance and membership records in the United States.⁵⁹

The situation is far more complex than some researchers acknowledge, naïvely ignoring the data that reveals how little theology plays a significant role in American religious priorities. Ultimately, there are numerous factors that correlate with church growth; the principal among them being birth rates (a factor of socio-economic demographics), youth retention, and evangelistic efforts. While some will eventually blame the breakdown of American Christianity on so-called “liberal” or “postmodern” theology, the truth is that conservative denominations are already suffering from a decline likely because they are beginning to experience a drop in the same three principal factors that traditionally help other churches grow. In the end, as geographical, cultural, sociopolitical, economic, educational, and religious isolation erodes in all parts of the United States, so will the stability and growth of conservative evangelicalism alongside their liberal counterparts, further confirming the findings of Howard’s “Religion Singularity.” Institutional Christianity, in all its varied forms, is destabilizing and will likely disappear by the end of the twenty-first century if patterns of decline and fragmentation persist.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ Cf. C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves, “What the Polls Don’t Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance,” *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 6 (December 1993): 741-52; Robert D. Woodberry, “When Surveys Lie and People Tell the Truth: How Surveys Oversample Church Attenders,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (February 1998): 119-22; and Michael Hout and Andrew Greeley, “What Church Officials’ Reports Don’t Show: Another Look at Church Attendance Data,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (February 1998): 113-19.

⁶⁰ Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 81-88.

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