



**“WHAT IS YOUR GOSPEL?”**  
**SCRIPTURE: 2 TIMOTHY 2:8-16**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**October 9, 2022**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

**2 Timothy 2:8-15**

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David--that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained.

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.

Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

The Word of the LORD  
Thanks be to God.

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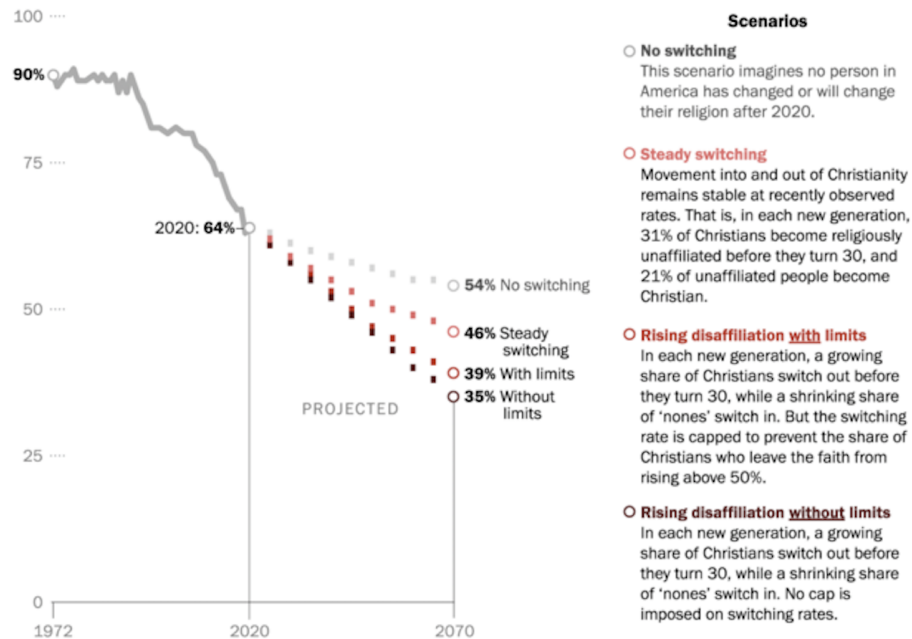
Christianity appears to be on track to lose its place as the majority religion in America in the not too distant future.

**(put up Pew Research  , split screen on Youtube, full screen in sanctuary)**

Commented [1]: @micah@gpcusa.org I uploaded this image to the uploader  
\_Assigned to Micah Hayes\_

## U.S. Christians projected to fall below 50% of population if recent trends continue

% of Americans who are Christian



Note: Historical data describes trends among U.S. adults based on surveys of adults. The 2020 estimate and subsequent projections show Americans of all ages. In 2020, we estimate that the religious composition of people of all ages roughly matches the adult composition. Sources: General Social Survey (1972-2006); Pew Research Center surveys (2007-2021); Pew Research Center projections (2020-2070). "Modeling the Future of Religion in America"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Many of you may have seen the Pew Study that was recently released—it gives us a statistical read of the information that we've been hearing for decades now—the number of Americans identifying as Christian has been in a steady and sometimes extreme decline with every generation.

*In the early '90s, about 90% of people in the U.S. identified as Christians, the report said. In 2020, Christians accounted for about 64% of the U.S. population, including children. Meanwhile, those who are not affiliated with a religion has grown from 16%*

*in 2007 to 30% in 2020, according to the research. All other religions, including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, accounted for about 6% in 2020.<sup>1</sup>*

**(Take image down)**

We could say Christianity has been waning since it was born. I know that sounds counter intuitive given the way Christianity spread across the world—mostly by conquest and colonization. I would argue that if we want to define Christianity as adherence to Jesus’ teachings, it’s been on life support for a while now.

The minute Christianity became a tool of Empire, Jesus-following took a debilitating blow to the heart of what this faith is all about.

So, if this study is tracking the dwindling number of institutionalized Christians, and I believe it is, then I would say this could be a hopeful sign—perhaps this country is on track to disentangle ourselves from a distorted cooptation of a faith that was born to be a revolt against the very thing it has become.

We are seeing many signs in our culture right now that institutionalized Christianity is trying to hold on to power with its bloody fingernails. The Supreme Court decision over the Summer about Roe v. Wade is a clear example.

It is an attempt to impose values on all of us—when most of us do not adhere to the values espoused. I would argue the values being imposed on us are not truly Christian values—as in the values Jesus taught to the crowds in the ancient Mediterranean world, but the values of Christianity co-opted by Empire, by colonizers, by whiteness, by supremacy, by misogyny, by anti-blackness and heteronormativity.

Institutionalized Christianity has effectively imposed itself across the world—and now it is effectively destroying itself by basically being itself. As generations absorb its impact over time, people are disentangling their beliefs about ultimate reality from institutionalized Christianity.

The fastest growing religious identity is “nothing in particular.”

It is in the midst of this trending movement that we gather together in a faith community that by many counts is defying the odds. We are growing. We are intergenerational. We do not adhere to the stated Christian values that are being used as a bludgeon against

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/christianity-us-shrinking-pew-research/>

LGBTQIA+ people, against impregnated bodies, against bodies that do not adhere to white normativity.

Churches like Grace Covenant are not trending upward these days.

Let me be clear, I am not grieving the decline of institutionalized Christianity. To say this country has ever been “Christian” is a grotesque distortion of the faith that defines my life. This country is an iconic example of a Christianity co-opted by economies of greed using the artifacts of Jesus’ ministry (scripture, community, proclamation) to prop up systems and perspectives that were never what Jesus was about.

So, the demise of institutionalized Christianity is a sign of hope.

The live question for a community like ours is who are we as the moorings of institutionalized Christianity unravel?

What is your gospel, our gospel, in a world where the gospel got co-opted and is now mistaken for a disintegrating religion?

This letter to Timothy echoes with this question. The letter writer—whether you believe it was Paul or someone writing under Paul’s name. The suggestion is that there were multiple gospels out there competing for attention even just three generations into the Jesus experiment.

The letter writer identifies a particular gospel that they have staked their life on—the one that connects Jesus to Jewish lineage, the one that teaches he actually was raised from the dead. The letter writer says—that’s the Jesus I am staking my life on—that’s the Jesus I am willing to suffer to support, that the Jesus I am willing to be in chains for—because that’s the Jesus that can change the world, that’s the Jesus that is so threatening to the powers and principalities that adherents are seen as threats to the social order, to the economic system, to the political strongholds, to the power structures.

The gospel the letter writer is hoping Timothy is committed to is the gospel that has consequences.

Does your gospel have consequences?

The letter writer is hoping Timothy is willing to go the distance with the impact this gospel has on people’s lives. What is your gospel’s impact on your life?

The letter writer is asking Timothy crucial questions during a challenging time, during a time when he is struggling with how hard it is to be a faithful person in a world that co-opts our deepest beliefs to work against our best possibilities.

What is dying in you, Timothy, the letter writer asks? What are you shedding? What are you letting go of because of your gospel?

These are questions that echo from our ancestors in the faith—those echoes hold deep resonance for us right now in our journey as a community seeking after Jesus' ways in the world.

What is our gospel? What is the gospel that can truly set us free? The one that is unchained and the one that we can trust to break our chains? What is the gospel that teaches us the ways of the Jesus who is faithful, the Jesus who cannot and will not abandon himself and the truth he lived and breathed in a struggling world.

That's the Jesus who calls us to remember—to remember how he lived and how he died and how he gave us glimpses of eternity. That's the Jesus who doesn't just want to be a memory, but who fills us with his own flesh and blood so that our bodies can be healed, so that our bodies can move and breathe in the freedom that only love can give us.

If our gospel is the gospel that is unchained, if our Jesus is the Jesus who does not deny himself—then our gospel cannot be one that is deployed to put anyone in chains, then our gospel cannot be an instrument of erasing Jesus' truth.

Jesus walks with us today in movements of liberation. Jesus was courageous, curious, compassionate, and all about community. He is where we get our values, our sense of purpose, our center of gravity at GCPC.

**(Put up Black Jesus image—full screen in sanctuary and split screen on Youtube)**

Not the Jesus who got turned white by the colonizers. Not the Jesus who got turned straight by the morality police. Not the Jesus who got turned a nationalist by corporations and ruling classes. Not the Jesus who got turned a misogynist by insecure men afraid of being exposed by wise and powerful women.

We know that is not our Jesus. Our Jesus is not white. He is not straight. He is not waving an American flag or telling women to sit down and shut up in church.

**(Take down Black Jesus Image)**

Our Jesus would never violate his own values like that. And that's why we are willing to follow him even when it's hard, even when we are not sure what will happen next, even when so many in the world around us don't see or hear or believe in that Jesus.

The faith that embodies the capacity to persist against the odds.

Amanda Gorman's poem, Faith and Fury, is a letter to those who long for freedom to be true for everyone. She speaks to us like the letter writer to Timothy—with clarity of mind and purpose. Unashamed of the gospel that defines her life and any life committed to liberation.

Our goal has never been revenge, just restoration;  
not dominance, just dignity;  
not fear, just freedom;  
just justice.

Whether we prevail is determined  
not by all the challenges that are present  
But by all the change that is possible.  
And though we be unstoppable,  
If we ever feel like we might fail,  
If we be fatigued and frail  
When our fire can no longer be fueled by fury,  
We will be fortified by this faith  
Found in the vow, the anthem:  
All black lives matter, no matter what!  
Black lives are worth living,  
Worth defending,  
Worth every struggle.  
We must stand up for all of us and our aims,  
United through protest and pain,  
Amplifying women, the LGBTQ community,  
and people with disabilities.  
Because none of us are free  
Until all of us break our chains.  
We owe it to the fallen to fight,  
But we owe it to ourselves  
To never stay kneeling  
When the day calls us to stand together.  
We envision a land

That is liberated, not lawless;  
We create a future  
That is free, not flawless.  
Over and over, again and again,  
We will stride up every mountain side,  
Magnanimous and modest.  
We will be protected and served  
By a force that is honored and honest.  
This is more than protest —  
It's a promise!

Sounds like a reprise of the gospel to which we aspire, Grace Covenant. Our gospel is and always will be the promise of freedom for all.

Thanks be to God.