

Voices: Americans are trusting pastors less. Is that a bad thing?

January 17, 2018

Americans don't trust ministers as much as they used to.

Such is the latest finding of a recent [Gallup poll](#) examining American's perceptions of the average trustworthiness of various occupations. Only 42 percent of those surveyed described the presence of ethical behavior among clergy members as "high" or "very high."

Why less trust?

While that's not a terrible rating overall, it's the same as judges. For example, it's a new low in a larger downward trend. That's down more than 20 points from the survey's high point in 1985, when 67 percent of respondents rated general clergy ethics as "high" or "very high." [This chart](#) by Christianity Today shows the unmistakable long drop.

Why are Americans becoming less trusting of ministers? None of the easy answers seem to work.

We could say it's because of public scandals around high-profile ministers, but trust in ministers was at its highest in the '80s, a decade filled with public scandals surrounding televangelists in particular. If trust of clergy were related to disgraces surrounding very visible figures, the 1980s should have seen even less trust in ministers.

We might also speculate that declining trust in ministers has to do with our political context, but this doesn't work either: the decline has been

consistent for at least the last three decades, well before the turmoil of the 2016 election.

What's changed about the church in America in the last 30 years to make the larger culture more suspicious of the church? I don't actually think very much has. Rather, I think the change lies in American society instead.

A clash of values

Christianity upholds values that don't make sense to those who aren't followers of Christ and makes demands of its followers that aren't intelligible to those who don't share our convictions.

Followers of Christ surrender every aspect of their lives: Christ makes demands on our jobs, our wallets, our bodies and every other part of our existence.

Self-expression and inclusivity are today's predominant cultural values, and Christian convictions temper both of these. Christ calls us to be our truest selves, but tells us that things that feel good and right to us are ultimately destructive. Christ calls us to bring all people into our fold, especially the disadvantaged, but he still requires repentance and submission.

The message of Christianity is not an intuitive one. Those without faith in Christ will find much of what Christianity demands unreasonable and suspect (particularly as this relates to money and sexual behavior), and the Christian can't explain these things in a way that makes sense outside of the context of Christian discipleship.

As our society grows more secular, Christianity and American cultural values are reaching an impasse, a point of departure. Maybe that's how it should be.

Aliens and exiles

Christ was crucified for the message he preached. Peter and Paul were killed by the state, and the apostle John lived his life in exile. It seems inevitable that the closer we follow Christ, the more alienated from the world we become.

Certainly, we can't abandon the world entirely; this is the world God created, that God loves and that God has promised to save. But we have to recognize that, until Christ returns, we live as "[aliens and exiles](#)" in a foreign land.

Christians in America haven't had to face this reality for most of our country's existence. This is beginning to change, and that's a good thing. We'll follow Jesus more fully when we do so in the context of a society that doesn't understand us.

I'm glad to hear that general American culture is becoming less trusting of pastors as it becomes more secularized. If this weren't the case, it would indicate that the Church was becoming more secular as well.

Public scandals around clergy and less-than-Christlike behavior by Christians certainly occur and certainly impact public trust of Christians and Christian leaders. But even if these things weren't the case, I suspect we'd see a similar trend. The Church is a challenge to the world, a testimony to something it doesn't know.

Christians in America have been privileged since the country's inception, and that privilege is only now beginning to face challenges. Rather than trying to reclaim or hold on to privilege, I think moments like these are an opportunity for the church to reflect on its nature and relationship to society.

If we find that the world doesn't understand who we are or what we are doing, we're in good company.

Jake Raabe is a student at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas. He is also a co-founder of [Patristica Press](#), a Waco-based publishing house.