



What's Happening in Protestantism

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Statistics show curious things about the development of the Protestant churches, and Doctor Richelsen makes pungent comment on the course of denominationalism and the attitude of religious leaders.

MANY of us have sensed that Protestantism is undergoing changes. Are these changes really momentous and do they mean anything particularly worth knowing? It may be left to the ecclesiastical bosses to become excited over such fluctuations in church conditions as accompany the usual periods of greater or lesser religious interest.

The actual facts in the church situation to-day have a real kick to them. They will be sufficiently startling even for blasé churchmen; and a blasé churchman is capable of more blasé regarding religion than any earnest believer could believe possible.

Although everybody knows that the greatest shake-up of its life is taking place, it is silly to believe that Protestantism in America is losing adherents. The usual answer to the query about what's happening in Protestantism is that it is dying out. But that is only a wild guess. Protestantism has really come face to face with conditions unparalleled by historic precedents and therefore they are at first most amazing and puzzling.

Regardless of one's personal creed, any student of contemporaneous social conditions knows that momentous changes in religious institutions are sure to have far-reaching consequences.

Protestantism, it can be shown, has broken away from its leaders and is running with the bit in its teeth like an old family horse gone on a rampage and responding only with an additional kick at the buggy-shafts whenever the driver yells a frantic whoa. The facts clearly indicating this state of affairs become available by digging into some recently issued books of denominational statistics. Venerable institutions will not be misrepresented, for the figures are published by the denominations themselves. All that is needed is a little clearer arrangement of the facts. Then the conclusions will prove to be like the kick of a camel, seemingly effortless yet very effective.

Four prominent Protestant denominations—the Presbyterians (in the U. S. A.), the Congregationalists, the Baptists (both Northern and Southern Conventions), and the Episcopalians—with a combined constituency of 9,149,184 members, form a considerable portion of American Protestantism. By noting the peculiar gyrations of figures presented by these four denominations we may learn what is happening in Protestantism to-day. I do not mean to say that the church authorities are juggling these statistics like an Anti-Saloon League Anderson or padding them like evangelists. To the contrary, there is

every reason to believe that the numbers as presented are substantially correct. The extraordinary peculiarities they exhibit argue against their being the result of design or conspiracy. They show that a cyclone has hit Protestantism. A twister has romped down its Main Street. Now what you expect to see isn't there; what by all logic you would not expect to behold, is prominently on exhibition. For instance, did you think the denominations were going backward in membership, or standing still?

If becoming a church-member meant the same thing, or anywhere near the same thing as becoming a Christian, this age is undoubtedly a saintly one, for nearly every denomination is making noteworthy additions to the numbers of adherents. Church-membership is today the best-sold commodity in America. More people join churches between Christmas and Easter than there are hotdogs sold between the 4th of July and Labor Day. And why not? Nobody now bothers with the inconvenience of getting converted before joining a church, especially in the cities. Nothing could possibly fluster a metropolitan church so much as to have some one catch religion in it. That would be like having a Bolshevik join the Manufacturers' Association. It isn't being done. Also there are no initiation fees in joining a church. There are no dues, or collect them if you can. The easiest way to get rid of church people and forget all about the church is to join one. So, as we have been intimating, people are joining the churches. Will you have a small handful of figures on these statements before we pass on to other matters?

In 1927 the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.) had a net gain of 18,157 members after chalking off all losses

from defections, departures, and decreases. The Baptists reported a prosperous year with a net total gain of 41,712 adherents. The Congregational Church kicks in with its report of 22,665 additional converts for the year's salaries, and the Episcopal Church coyly shows its hand with 17,259 more believers than it ever before had enrolled at one time. (For additional information see "Minutes of the General Assembly, 1927," "American Baptist Year-Book, 1927," "The Congregational Year Book, 1926," and "The Living Church Annual, 1927.") Every prominent Protestant denomination stands to-day at the highest point of its history in respect to adherents. The Lutherans topped their previous year with 67,879 net gain, the Methodists with 150,910, the Disciples with 44,801, the Evangelicals with 9,764. The average growth of Protestantism is at normal with its record for the past thirty years. Then what's happening in Protestantism?

An eyeful of something that stings like the morning sun is suddenly squirted at us from an apparently dead column of figures which we come upon as we idly finger the pages of church statistics. Beginning ten years ago the Congregational Church has consistently in every year since then suffered a net loss in the number of its churches. Look at these figures of the total number of their church organizations year by year, with not a break in the decade from the regularity of the downward trend:

YEAR	NO. OF CHURCHES
1915	6,103
1916	6,089
1917	6,050
1918	6,019
1919	5,959
1920	5,924
1921	5,873
1922	5,826

YEAR	NO. OF CHURCHES
1923	5,716
1924	5,680
1925	5,636

The impeccable regularity of these figures is striking. Here is not simply the chronicle of a peculiar off year. Every year of the past decade has been an off year. Some "trend" got started in 1915 that has trended a steady gait ever since then. And if this downward glide of the numbers of the church organizations is viewed in contrast with the equally regular upward swing of the membership increases the movement looks more like an Alpine snowslide than a "trend." It is like two trains when they pass each other going in opposite directions. For during this same period of ten years the denomination grew from 780,414 to 901,660 members. Not only have the Congregationalists no additional church organizations because of their gain in membership but they have 467 fewer churches than they had ten years ago before these 121,246 additional members were received. This denomination now actually has fourteen fewer church organizations than it had in 1900, although it now has 268,311 more members than in 1900. Yes, we have some phenomena.

Hastening to lay hands on the Presbyterian "What's What" ("Handbook, 1928, Presbyterian Church in U. S. A.," page 12) to see if anything was stirring in Presbyterianism while the Congregationalists were having their dizzy ride, we find this summary of statistics for 1927 as compared with 1926:

Net gain in number of new members.	18,157
Net loss in number of churches.....	68

The same consistent trend, steadily up on one track and down on the other, up membership and down churches, in

the Presbyterian fold starts with 1921. Before 1921 the movement was begun but the pace was not kept up unfalteringly. The following are the official figures but the arrangement of them is made by us for clarity of impression:

YEAR	MEMBERS	CHURCHES
1920.....	1,637,105	9,769
1921.....	1,722,361	9,842
1922.....	1,756,918	9,710
1923.....	1,803,593	9,706
1924.....	1,830,928	9,678
1925.....	1,873,859	9,649
1926.....	1,909,111	9,565
1927.....	1,927,268	9,497

Since 1921 the Presbyterians have grown steadily every year in memberships, adding in the period from 1921 to 1927, a total of 204,908 adherents and losing churches steadily every year in the same period for a total setback of 345 organizations.

The Northern Baptist Convention with a membership of 1,392,820 had 8,393 churches in 1926 and reports 8,266 for 1927, a loss of 127 organizations. The Southern Baptist Convention, a body of 3,765,001 members, had 26,436 churches in 1926 and 25,555 in 1927, thus wiping out 881 of these institutions for the one year. According to the "American Baptist Year-Book," 1927, the two Baptist bodies present the following eye-twisting conclusions for the year 1927 as compared with 1926:

Net gain in number of new members.	75,610
Net loss in number of churches.....	1,008

The Protestant Episcopal Church in 1920 had one church organization for every 131 members. In five years since then it has gained one church organization for each additional 3,031 new members.

The latest "Statistics" issued by

Doctor Carroll (1927), shows the combined 23 bodies of the Lutheran Church, with a membership of 2,656,158, having a gain in membership for the year of 67,879 with a net loss of 101 organizations, thus joining the procession with the Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians. Here, surely is an odd kettle of fish in the Protestantism of to-day. It is not being claimed that every denomination shows exactly the same plus and minus signs. There may be exceptions which we have not found. The denominations examined above, however, are all outstanding ones and vary sufficiently from one another to cover the entire range of denominational appeal. With our minds adjusted to the peculiarities of these official statistics we may now make assertions which might at first have been considered unwarranted and certainly would have been open to misconstruction.

Thousands of Protestant churches are now yearly being dissolved, dismissed, and abandoned. New churches born do not begin to replace the number of the dead. This condition began approximately ten years ago and is now making itself tremendously felt throughout the whole of Protestantism. During the past ten years the Congregationalists "dropped" 1,046 organizations, the Presbyterians "dismissed" 61 and "dissolved" 1,143, a total death list for the two denominations for the past ten years of 2,250 churches; while they had a net gain of 470,348 members.

In the country districts the abandoned church edifice is becoming a common sight. Few hamlets are without these memorials of other days; oft-times with the significant cemetery adjoining. In the towns and cities the abandonment of churches is not so con-

spicuous because land values influence the tearing down of the buildings to be replaced with commercial structures. It is mainly in the rural sections that these little, abandoned Protestant churches stand out like sore thumbs. Yet there is no reason whatever for doubting that except in such country sections where the population is being depleted the country churches as a whole are sharing with the city churches in the steady growth of memberships. Everywhere there are fewer churches but more members than before the loss of churches took place. The abandonment of one edifice has been more than compensated for in the additional membership growth of the continuing ones of the same general neighborhood, if not of the same denomination.

It may be plausibly argued that what is happening in Protestantism is that people no longer take religion seriously. One finds it difficult to affirm or deny such an opinion without a definition of what is meant by the term religion. There is little doubt that people are taking less seriously things which formerly were considered essentials of religion. Formerly people were concerned about the mode of baptism, foreordination, free will, election, and transubstantiation. They would fight for their convictions and feel justified in creating and maintaining separate organizations to proclaim them even though in nine of ten other matters they were at complete agreement with some other existing organization. Now there is little of such intensity of religious opinion. The prevailing sentiment of modern Protestantism is that one denominational body is about as right as another. Innocent and innocuous as that statement may seem to be, the sentiment has had revolutionary power.

The war-horses of the denominations have snorted fire over the abandonment of churches, but the process is defiantly continuing. To-day, in an overchurched community, one organization regardless of its denomination gets the edge on the other churches either because of its location, architecture, musical equipment, Sunday-school facilities or its preacher's curly hair. So it steps out and forward with its programme. Formerly such an awakening would have caused the trumpets to be sounded by the other denominations to pitch in and compete. But to-day the prevailing sentiment of the community switches to the aggressive organization on the principle that a church is a church and that we all are striving for the same heaven. Soon only the die-hards are left in some of the weaker churches and then in due season comes the end. The denominational leaders throw up the sponge in face of such indifference to denominational pride and prestige. The old summons to denominational loyalty falls on deaf ears. With heart-breaking apathy a minor group of denominational adherents permits itself to become amalgamated with some existing church organization rather than maintain a struggling church for itself. And so impartial, as between denominations, is this modern trend that all share fairly evenly the losses of church organizations and the gains of membership.

What's happening in Protestantism will be explained with anathemas or with benedictions according to one's view-point. Of the revolutionary facts there can be no question. Some will say that the river has been broadened out so

much by the removal of denominational banks that religious thinking has become a swamp. Others will offer a definition of religion. "We haven't enough religion among us to get up a good church fight," it was once explained to me concerning a certain church. Protestantism to-day hasn't enough religion (?) to split up into further "spite" churches and competitive organizations in overchurched territories. Protestantism is gaining in memberships but is abandoning weak churches in the interest of consolidation. This has come about not by high-sounding proclamations of purpose but by the silent decisions of church-members to jump the denominational traces.

Protestantism will now doubtless continue to furnish an enlarging scope of usefulness for the services of an ecclesiastical undertaker rather than mid-wife. What Protestantism now needs most of all is a dignified order of service for the interment of defunct church organizations. The dedication services even for very small churches are always elaborate. Protestantism never slights the christening exercises. But when an organization dies there is no ceremony at the grave, and too often the corpse is simply abandoned and left unburied. The Congregationalists and Presbyterians alone should have said the burial service over 2,250 times during the past ten years.

The dissolution of a Protestant church in America to-day, under the usual circumstances, should really be celebrated with a beautiful ritual, filled with the spirit of optimism over the triumph of a better Protestantism.





Mosaic in Oxford Blue

BY ELEANOR EVANS WING

The Vestibule

A RAINY day in Oxford. I should have been disappointed if there hadn't been rain and shiny streets and shivers when I stepped off the train, laden with hat-boxes, at the London & Northwestern station after a tedious ride in lonely state in a first-class carriage. Some perverse instinct seemed to say that there could easily be disillusion if things were pleasant. There was nothing pleasant about arriving in the town of fabled dreams and spires and fires and winds and wines. Crowds of laughing, bantering, wide-trouserred youths piled out of the third-class carriages. They didn't look at me, or wink, or nudge one another. They never thought of taxis, porters, or tips. They fumbled badly with hasty searches for the elusive little ticket which admits you to the other side of the station picket fence. How difficult it is to hang on—like grim death—to the thin piece of paper one is handed at the beginning of a journey in England. And how impossible it is to convince phlegmatic officials that one has once possessed such a ticket. For there is no relaxation of law. Every one must pay again if he loses it. I think I should dub my ticket *congé*, except that being in England, I quickly learned to scorn the French.

As I stood beside my bags (how soon I learned not to call suitcases that) waiting for a porter who never came, for the first time I felt the spirit of American confidence and flapper courage ebbing. Why had the train stopped so that the

third-class carriages were more accessible to easy exit than the first? I had stepped off the train into mud. Those less plutocratic than I had landed on well-swept platforms, protected from the rain. I had travelled alone, unspoken to; had disembarked, unremarked, in spite of a very carefully planned Lord and Taylor costume complete to pale mauve socks. Not so do American college girls step off college trains. And why did my suitcase, distinguished, as I thought, by its foreign labels, stay where I had dropped it in a very disastrous puddle of mud?

But was all this disillusioning? I think I was glad to be ignored. There was adventure in it, strange pique, and not a little curiosity. It takes a great deal to disturb a prom-trotting conceit, however superficial it is. And one such experience was only amusing. I was to learn in a few days that girls were tolerated here, not wanted; that more than once the hardest part of going to a lecture was to be standing in the Examination Schools, on freezing floors, while Englishmen leisurely slept through them on comfortable chairs and benches.

Seizing my suitcase with an effort at determination, I trudged through the gates, unassisted by even the gatekeeper although he was young and handsome. What a weary walk it was before I reached the corner of the High and the Corn. I had gleaned this power to recognize these streets from a ludicrous