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Evangelizing the Nation: Good News, Bad News
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One of the marks of evangelical Christian churches is their emphasis on evangelism. They encourage their members to go out and "win souls for Christ," emphasizing the belief that Christ sent his followers out into world to bring the world to Him. These churches hold classes in evangelizing, their youths and college students are taught techniques for "witnessing" to non-believers, and their worship services often include testimony from people who entered the church as a result of evangelizing.

But does Evangelism work? Does it bring non-Christians to Christianity? The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, just published by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, provides an opportunity to test that question with some solid data. The Pew survey was a massive undertaking, interviewing more than 35,000 people across the United States. It carefully distinguishes between Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant denominations. When the survey compares the two groups, the results are mixed about the effectiveness of evangelism.

To start, when one compares the characteristics of the two groups' membership, Evangelical and Mainline Christianity look almost identical. They are so close that the difference lies within the statistical margin of error. Fifty-four percent of the members of Mainline churches still belong to the denomination in which they grew up, while the same is true of 51 percent of Evangelicals.

About 30 percent of the membership of each group were raised Protestant, but in a different denominational family from the one to which they now belong. For example, a person may have grown up Baptist but now attends a Methodist church, or an Episcopalian child may have become Pentacostalist as an adult. Finally, 9 percent of Mainline Protestants are former Catholics, while 11 percent of Evangelicals were once Catholic.

Added up, 93 percent of both groups consist of people who have been Christians from childhood. Evangelical and Mainline Protestants retain approximately the same percentage of people born into the religion, they attract the same percentage of other Protestants, and about the same number of Catholics. About 2 percent of the membership of each group come from other religions and about 5 percent come from the "unaffiliated." So despite all the emphasis on winning new souls for Christ, percentage-wise the Evangelicals are no more effective at it than the Mainline churches.

Or are they? According to the General Social Surveys from the 1970s and early 1980s, Mainline churches accounted for more than 33 percent of all Americans, while only about 16 percent of Americans belonged to Evangelical churches. But according to the 2008 survey, Evangelicals now outnumber Mainline Protestants, by 26 percent to 18 percent. There has been a precipitous drop in Mainline membership over the past three decades, while Evangelical membership has increased 10 percent.

So evangelism works, right? Well, not really. It turns out that the reversal between the two groups is largely due to the 30 percent of Protestants that change denominational families. When Evangelicals switch, they usually switch to another Evangelical denomination. When Mainline Christians switch, about half of them change to the Evangelical group. So the growth in Evangelicalism has largely been fueled by the decline in Mainline churches, not by winning new converts from outside Christianity.

This conclusion is supported by two further observations. Even as both Protestant groups have brought 5 percent of their membership from people unaffiliated with Christianity, the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown from 8 percent of Americans in the 1970s to 16 percent today.

Finally, the overall percentage of American Protestants is dropping. In the 1970s, these two Protestant groups combined comprised 50 percent of all Americans. Today, they constitute less than 45 percent. Indeed, even when all Protestants are combined, the Pew Survey indicates that America is about to lose its standing as a Protestant majority nation for the first time in its history.

So while Evangelical Protestantism has successfully become the largest Christian group in the United States (Catholics comprise just under 24 percent), it has done so not by bringing new Christians into the fold, but by drawing them from other forms of Christianity.

Correction: In my previous column I wrote the statement, Catholic theology holds "Catholicism provides the only path to salvation." This is incorrect. Catholicism believes that baptism brings non-Catholics into salvation. I apologize for any confusion my misstatement may have caused.