

A vertical strip of a stained glass window is visible on the left side of the slide. It features a grid of colorful glass panes in shades of purple, blue, green, and yellow, with dark leaded glass lines separating them. The design is abstract and geometric.

The Gospel and the “Nones”:

Retelling the Jesus Story

Bill J. Leonard, Wake
Forest University

CBFNC March 2014



A Believers' Church: Baptists make Conversion Normative

- 1. A religious experience required of all who would claim church membership.**
- 2. Conversion—a late requirement—replaces Catholic/Anglican Sacramentalism.**
- 3. Defined: “That the church of Christ is a company of faithful people, separated from the world by the word & Spirit of God being knit unto the Lord & one another, by baptism, upon their own confession of the faith and sins.” (English Declaration, 1611)**
- 4. Distinguishing Baptist Identity: Uncoerced faith, anti-establishment, conscience and dissent**

A vertical stained glass window with a grid pattern, featuring various colors including purple, blue, green, and yellow, with some abstract designs.

American Religion: Current Trends

- 1. Denominational systems disconnecting, disengaging, debating**
- 2. Fewer individuals think of religious identity as denominational.**
- 3. Congregations minimize denominational relationships.**
- 4. Non-denominational “fellowships” increasingly “normative”**
- 5. Rise of a de facto “generic Christianity.”**
- 6. “Nones”, the non-affiliated — “believers, not belongers”**
- 7. Public theological/ethical debates turn many away from religious affiliation.**
- 8. Funding for traditional programs increasingly problematic**
- 9. “Spirituality” movement reflects pluralism**

A vertical stained glass window with a grid pattern, featuring various colors including purple, blue, green, and yellow, with some abstract designs.

Statistics: American Grace/Pew

- “Mainline” Churches=13% of population
- “Evangelicals” peak 29% in 1990s, plateaued at 25%
- Catholics=18%, “catastrophic” decline in “Anglo-Catholics” (65 million)
- “Nones”=No religious affiliation; increase from 7% to 20% in polls in 3-5 years (1/5 population)
- 30% ages 18-33 register as “nones.”
- Declines across theological spectrum.

2007: 38% of “seldom attenders” were religiously unaffiliated—In 2012 that was 49%

Millennials: Pew Survey 2014

1. “Relatively unattached to organized politics and religion.”
2. “Linked by social media.”
3. “Burdened by debt,” especially education.
4. “Distrustful of people” and institutions.
5. “In no rush to marry.”
6. “Optimistic about the future.”
7. Most racially diverse generation, 43% non-white, become a majority ca. 2043.
8. Politically independent, lean left.
9. While 86% believe in God, only 58% “certain”

Permanent Transition: Questions

- *In a time of transition how do “believers’ churches” declare the gospel?*
- *How is religious identity passed on to a new generation?*
- *How does the changing sociology of Sunday impact the 21st century church?*
- *As the nones” rapidly increase, how do churches call persons to faith and discipleship?*
- *What are some strategies for religious communities during this time of great change?*

A vertical strip of a stained glass window is visible on the left side of the slide. It features a grid of colorful glass panes in shades of blue, purple, yellow, and green, separated by dark lead lines. The light filtering through creates a vibrant, multi-colored effect.

Early Baptists—Contradictory Morphologies

- 1. The Norm: Conversion “Testimony” confirmed by congregation, followed by believer’s baptism**
- 2. Particular (Calvinist) Baptists**
 - a. TULIP**
 - b. Grace “infused” into the Elect**
 - c. Waiting on Grace**
 - d. Process: Regeneration precedes repentance and faith. “That faith is ordinarily begot by the preaching of the Gospel without respect to any power or capacity in the creature but it is wholly passive, being dead in sins” London 1644**



3. General (Arminian) Baptists

- a. Prevenient (enabling) grace cooperates with saving grace
- b. Election based on free will for repentance and faith, which precede regeneration
- c. Christ's atonement for all
- d. Grace received, resisted or ignored
- e. Falling from grace is real possibility
- f. "All at one time or other, are put into such a capacity, as that (through the grace of God) they may be eternally saved." Standard Conf, 1660

4. Those "united unto Christ by effectual faith, are regenerated, and have a new heart and spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ & by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, received by faith."

Revivalism: a Normative Method

1. Immediate Conversion: No waiting
2. Prayer of Faith: Conversion prayer
3. Coming forward-The Invitation
4. Conversion as “Jesus Event”- “Born-Again”
5. Baptism as response to faith
6. Plan of salvation/Sinner’s Prayer
7. When revival ‘norm’ wanes, what then?

Options for the future

1. *Revisit the nature and process of coming to faith.*
2. *Distinguish between conversion event (entering in) and conversion experience (going on)*
3. *Distinguish “once-born” and “twice-born” religious experiences*
4. *Conversion inseparable from spirituality*
5. *Rituals—baptism, prayer, walking the aisle—are external signs of inner grace.*
6. *Allow for public and private ways of declaring transformation.*
7. *Retelling the story: With Jesus by the lakeshore before Nicodemus and “new birth.”*
8. *Recapturing “Kingdom of God” (God’s New Day) language and praxis*
9. *Heal those who are hurting and eat with those who are healed and out of the healing and the eating will come God’s new community (JD Crossan, God and Empire)*

““He comes to us as One unknown, without a name,
as of old, by the lakeside,
He came to those . . . who knew Him not. He
speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and
sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our
time. He commands. And to those who obey Him,
whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal
himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which
they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an
ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own
experience Who He is.” (Albert Schweitzer, *The
Quest of the Historical Jesus*)