

# Half empty, half full

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*Is world Christianity on the up, or on the way out? The answer might depend on what kind of person you are.*



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**T**he 300th anniversary of a Christian publication affords us an opportunity to reflect on how things are going in the world of Western confessional Christianity. Accurate assessment is not easy, partly because most of the observers—you and I!—temperamentally lean either toward seeing the glass half empty, or seeing the glass half full. List for the ‘half empty’ folk some of the gains of the last half-century—for instance, the rise in serious Christian publications, the commitment to excellence in expository ministry in several quarters, renewed evangelism among post-modern biblical illiterates, evangelical seminaries and theological colleges that are numerically and theologically strong—and they will immediately mention the decline in church attendance in most Western countries, the marginalization of Christian ethics in our culture, the rise of biblical illiteracy, the multiplication of aggressive homosexuality, and the anti-Christian cast of many voices in the media and the courts. Begin with the negative phenomena, and the ‘half full’ types will list all the ways in which the grace of God is transparently manifest. So how should thoughtful Christians who want to escape mere sloganeering polarities think about these things?

Permit me six brief reflections.

**1.** This is not an exclusively Western problem. Everywhere in the world, Christians are tempted by extreme interpretations.

‘Half full’ voices tell observers how fast Christianity is growing in sub-Saharan black Africa, much faster than Islam; ‘half empty’ voices in the same area remind us how much syncretism still persists in African ‘Christianity’, and how few competent Bible teachers there are to stabilize the church: much could be swept away in another generation. ‘Half full’ voices watch the rapid growth of some form of evangelicalism in Latin America and China; ‘half empty’ voices note how much of it is ‘name it and claim it’ triumphalism in the former, and how much of it is poorly taught and with minimal access to good books and teachers in the latter. ‘Half full’ observers comment on the rapid growth of the church in the most populous Muslim country, viz. Indonesia, and observe that there are more Iranian Christians today than at any time in the past thousand years; ‘half empty’ commentators draw attention to two million martyrs in southern Sudan, to systematic oppression in Saudi Arabia, to the multiplication of states that are adopting Shariah. Similar polarities are universal.

**2.** Although the identification of trends can be pastorally useful, it is often a disreputable business. Telling the future by extrapolating present trends presupposes that present trends will continue, whereas *no* trend continues indefinitely. The mayor of the fastest growing small town in America recently commented that “if present trends continue” every person in America will live in his town by 2086. Mathematically, he was telling the truth; on the other hand, the mere datum should not be allowed to raise serious fears in our minds, because transparently this current trend will *not* continue. We control so very little; we foresee things

only a little distance ahead, with our accuracy falling off exponentially as we project years ahead instead of months, or decades ahead instead of years. Only God is the Lord of the future: read and re-read Isaiah 40ff.

**3.** Appeals to history are often equally slippery. The ‘half empty’ folk think of history as the good old days, whose glistening triumphs expose our desperate bankruptcy; the ‘half full’ people are inclined either to read history with a rosy hue (just as they read the present with a rosy hue) or to list all the weaknesses and failures of the past so as to provide a foil for recent triumphs. To the one, the Middle Ages were a time of intellectual solidarity behind a unified Christian vision, and producing giants like Thomas Aquinas; to the other, the Middle Ages were the dark ages, when life was brutish and short, indulgences multiplied, and the church produced a monster like Pope Innocent III. To the one, the nineteenth century produced heroic missionaries; to the other, these missionaries too often could not distinguish preaching the gospel and mandating Western culture. To the one, serious thinkers produced magisterial works of theology; to the other, the theology was much too indebted to unrecognized philosophical assumptions and scholastic arguments, while today’s Christians are becoming sensitized to the priorities of biblical theology. This list could be extended almost indefinitely.

**4.** Another factor, an important theological factor, must not be ignored. So often God reverses the trends in surprising and unforeseen ways. When the Italian Fascists swept into Ethiopia and the missionaries were expelled, the church was pathetically small, weak and unstable. A dozen years later, the church had multiplied unbelievably. When Mao-Zedong expelled missionaries from China, there were about one million ‘Christians’ (interpreting the term generously). It was easy to read the political developments with deep pessimism: the glass was half empty. Who would have predicted that a half-century later even conservative estimates place the number of Chinese believers at about 75 million? The rise (again!) of militant Islam can be seen as a

dangerous and depressing development. But who knows? God may use this in unpredictable ways to bring about the conversion of millions. Even the rise of secularism, philosophical materialism, and postmodern ethics in the West may, in the Lord’s mercy, be the dark hour before reformation. Certainly it is becoming easier to see who is a Christian, in biblical terms, and who is not. We cannot know if the end of these trends will be massive judgment in our time, or glorious reformation. In the strange but delightful calculus the Lord so often deploys, the weak become strong, the strong become weak. In some ways, the signs of strength and growth amongst us are at least as dangerous, potentially speaking, as the weaknesses, moral decay, and drift, for we easily fall into over-confidence, self-reliance, even arrogance.

**5.** What is at issue, then, is attitude. If the events and the trends through which we are living are not transparent predictors of the future, not only because of their inherent complexity but also because our sovereign God loves to overturn our pretensions, the difference between ‘half empty’ believers and ‘half full’ believers turns as much on personal attitude as on anything else. Here the advice of Tim Keller is percipient: For the Christian, optimism is naive, but pessimism is atheistic. Optimism is naive primarily because we believe what the Bible says about sin and about fallen human nature, but also because we read history. We have just come through the bloodiest century in human history. It takes a pathetic naiveté to imagine there is any good reason to suppose that the twenty-first century will be less bloody. But pessimism is atheistic. It forgets that God is sovereign, that there can be no degrees of difficulty with Omnipotence, that the Lord Jesus has promised, “I will build my church”.

**6.** What we need constantly are prophetic voices from the centre. In every generation, powerful voices emerge on one faddish front or another, pulling the church this way or that, offering ‘the’ solution, demanding

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some sort of complete makeover. Some cry that the sky is falling and that there is a danger of being left behind; others insist that the gospel is not only old but old-fashioned and needs to be jazzed up with either a higher number of miracles or at least with an intellectual structure that sounds progressive, perhaps even *avant garde*. 'Half empty' Christians will be tempted to circle the wagons and become defensive: the end is nigh. 'Half full' Christians will be tempted to read the tea leaves provided by the latest sociological analysis and re-shape the church to adapt to the new grid. It is far

from easy to sound prophetic from the centre when there are so many siren attractions on the fringes. But while we listen with pained realism to the reports of sin and decay, and while we learn what we can from the methods and insights of successive waves of pragmatists, what drives us is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let God be true, and every man a liar. We refuse to be pessimists or optimists. Ignoring the temptations of 'half empty' moanings and of 'half full' bubbleliness, we preach Christ and him crucified, and trust the One who reigns until he has put all his enemies under his feet. **B**