

# **“Who Is Falling Out the Windows of the Church?”**

**Dr. Steven P. Eason**

**First Presbyterian Church**

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## Introduction

I am honored to be invited, and especially to preach on this particular day. This is the first Sunday following the Parkland shooting. This is the first Sunday of Lent. It is most significant to me that we have the opportunity to proclaim the gospel on this particular day.

## Acts 20:7-12

<sup>7</sup>On the first day of the week, [Sunday], when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. <sup>8</sup>There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. <sup>9</sup>A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. <sup>10</sup>But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." <sup>11</sup>Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. <sup>12</sup>Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

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Paul preaches this guy to death! (*I've never preached a sermon like that, but I've heard about them!*) On and on and on.

A warm room, soft lighting, a cool breeze through the window and he's out! What would have been funny turns

out to be a tragedy when Eutychus falls three floors to his death.

Anna Carter Florence, Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, preached a series of sermons on this text entitled, *“A Prodigal Preaching Story: Paul, Eutychus, and Bored-to-Death Youth”* ([www.workingpreacher.org>profile](http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile) , November 23, 2009) She writes, *“This is the first recorded incident in the history of the Christian Church in which a young person is literally bored to death by preaching.”*

Reading her sermon was really the first time I had thought about this passage. It raised the question for me, *“Who else is falling out of the church?”* not just youth, but anybody, of all ages?

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Some of those folks may even be your grown children, and may likely be your grandchildren. What happened to them? They may have been raised in the church; went to Sunday School, attended youth group and even went on a mission trip or two. How did we lose them?

Things have changed.

Christianity was at one time the unofficial, official religion of our nation. Our prayers were offered in schools and public events. Our manger scenes were on government property at Christmas. Stores were closed on our sabbath. Sunday was a day of worship and rest. Sunday is now another Saturday.

If you attend church on a Sunday morning, in most parts of our nation, you are now in the minority.

*Youth sports* came along on Sundays to compete with church. *Dual career families* have increased. Parents are tired and many have declared Sundays as their only day to rest, even from church. And, somewhere along the way, people decided they could be “*spiritual but not religious.*”

Translated; they don't need the institutional church in order to experience God. Now we are losing some of the *Empty Nesters, or Baby Boomers*, when their children leave home.

They're free to travel on the weekends and burned out from years of structured children's activities. It's a good time to “skip church.” We can catch it on *Live Stream!* So technology has also changed us.

Add to all this:

- controversies over gay marriage
- church scandals; affairs, abuse, fraud and such
- a more open-minded, pluralistic view of religion
- a growing lack of trust in institutions
- more non-profits that do charitable work
- and a growing lack of knowledge of the Bible

We now have a Church located in the heart of a growing *secular culture*. That's where we are. Scotland, the Mother Church of Presbyterianism, has been there for years. Only 3% of the population in Europe attend church. We are on the same track, only years behind.

Great! That window Eutychus was sitting in has become a floodgate of people exiting the church.

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So what's a church to do? An aging Church is asking, "How can we get more people to join our church? How can we grow?"

We've tried a few things; contemporary worship; a band instead of an organ, casual dress and Starbucks coffee! Maybe that will bring them in.

Or how about a Saturday evening service? They could come before they go out to dinner. Or the church up the street has food trucks in the parking lot every Wednesday night. That looks good. What will it take to get them in?

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Rachel Held Evans, author of *Searching for Sunday*, posted a blog on the CNN website 5 years ago entitled "Why

*Millennials Are Leaving the Church.*” It received a lot of attention. She wrote;

*Time and again, the assumption among Christian leaders, and evangelical leaders in particular, is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates - edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans, and an updated website that includes online giving.*

*What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.*

*You can't hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there.*

[\(http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/\)](http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/)

I'd like to argue with that. There may be more Jesus in a church than you might think, but I would agree that the church does not always look like Christ. We have given

people a lot of reasons *not* to be here. The question is do we have any reasons why they should be here?

Stylistic changes don't get to the systemic issues.

Change and innovation are not bad things, but trying things just to survive can be dangerous. You end up chasing the market. When the market changes, you have to change with it. You can get lost doing that. You can forget what business you are in, who you are, and who you are not, when you chase the market.

*How* to grow a church is probably the less significant question. The core question is *Why?* Why are we here?

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Part of the answer may be in what Paul did next. He quit preaching and left the building! The direction of

attention shifted. No longer was Paul trying to get Eutychus' attention. Eutychus had Paul's attention!

Paul left the building. The church's agenda was interrupted. He went out and physically took Eutychus in his arms. He touched him. He noticed him. He cared about him. He held him. Then he said the words of hope; *"Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him."* (20:10)

The world longs to hear those words. Millions of people would love to be risen from the dead. They may not be able to say it, or know how to go about it, but they want life. Within the heart of every human being is a longing to know God, even if they cannot, or will not express it.

Augustine wrote; *"Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in Thee."* There is a lot of restlessness in this world today.

A church that is worried only about its survival will eventually die. People don't want to be preached to death. The church that is touching the dead will live.

To do that, we have to leave the building. Touch people who have fallen out of the windows of life. Affirm their lives. This is what God did in Christ; coming to us in our brokenness to touch us, to affirm us, and to restore us to life.

Eutychus was "*picked up dead.*"(20:9b) That would be the end of the story for a lot of people. They are dead to church, dead to their faith, dead to hope. If that were the end of the story, there would be no need for us to be here.

But we are here, with a different narrative, another ending. The Christian faith sees more than the

circumstances. Anybody can diagnose Eutychus as being dead. We see something else. We see God's hand at work in the world, raising people from the dead. We see hope.

That is our business. That is our calling. That is what we have to offer a world that God so loves. Say and live the words;

*"Do not be alarmed, for (your) life is in (you)!"* (20:10)

That's a church people might want to join!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Congregation: **Amen**