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PATTERNS OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Michael Watts' recent lecture to the Friends of the Dr Williams' Library seeks to answer the question, 'Why did the English stop going to church?' In doing this he challenges R. Gill's, *The Myth of the Empty Church*, which argues that the empty church was as much a nineteenth-century as a twentieth-century phenomenon. By contrast Watts suggests that church attendance in the nineteenth century was uniquely high, comparing the almost 40% of population attending church in 1851 with the 9.55% recorded by Marc Europe in 1989. The contrasts are fascinating:

	1851	1989	Variation
Church of England	20.19	2.95	- 684%
Roman Catholic Church	1.70	3.36	+ 506%
Methodists [Arminian]	8.80	1.02	- 863%
Congregational/ Presbyterian [URC]	4.23	0.29	- 1459%
Baptist	2.95	0.51	- 578%

A series of illustrations challenge the myth that pre-industrial England was associated with manifest piety. Complaints about Sunday trading and well-patronized public houses do not come exclusively from the twentieth century but from the middle ages, thus Innocent II's 'pastoral revolution' which sought but from the middle ages, thus Innocent II's 'pastoral revolution' which sought the modest commitment of attendance at confession and communion once a year. The post-Reformation church was more in earnest in trying to secure regular attendance with its threats of fines and imprisonment on those failing to conform. However, with the passing of the Toleration Act any hope of coercing attendance was removed: a Lincoln survey covering seventy-nine parishes in 1800 suggested only 16% of the population were in communion with the established church.

Judged against such a background the 40% of 1851 must be seen as a considerable achievement, rather than the mark of infidelity that contemporaries and many historians have construed it. Watts suggests from an analysis of conversion experiences that a very high percentage of dissenters in the period of maximum nonconformist strength had in fact been educated and nurtured as Anglicans in the first instance, and that one of the foremost pressures on their change of life-style was fear, fear of death, judgment and a physically-represented hell.

Watts argues that the 1880s represent the peak decade for church attendance in England, after which the churches found it more difficult to recruit young people, leading him to question whether it was the generation that experienced the theological controversies of Darwin and *Essays and Reviews* that proved more resistant to the church habit, though he puts even more emphasis upon the debates about eternal punishment, which were, of course, a major focus for Spurgeon's 'Downgrade' concerns. By contrast, 'Liberal Christianity did not fill the churches, it helped to empty them.'

Many explanations of the decline of church-going falter on comparisons with the situation in the USA where similar social pressures developed but where church attendance has continued to hover at around the 40% of population figure and this, it is suggested, is to be explained by the strength of conservative Christianity in North America. Watts concludes with this comment on the Baptist tradition: '. . . a hundred years after the Down Grade Controversy, I have to confess that both in his interpretation of history, and in his prognosis for the future, it was Spurgeon not Clifford who was right. The English churches of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like the Presbyterian churches of the eighteenth century, did indeed abandon 'the faith once delivered to the saints'. Whilst I find Dr Watts' analysis generally convincing, I am not sure that that conclusion does not pose many additional questions. Not all conservative denominations in the English scene have been denominations of growing congregations, nor was Clifford a simple Liberal or Spurgeon a crude Conservative, whilst the abandonment of the faith once delivered to the saints would need very careful documentation.