

WHY THE
1990s
CHANGED
EVERYTHING
IN AMERICAN
RELIGION



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**FIRST, THE HEADLINE:
SOMETHING BROKE OPEN
IN THE 1990S.**





The biggest changes in American religion did not happen all at once. But one short window of time changed everything. 1991 to 1998 may be the most consequential period in American religious history in generations.



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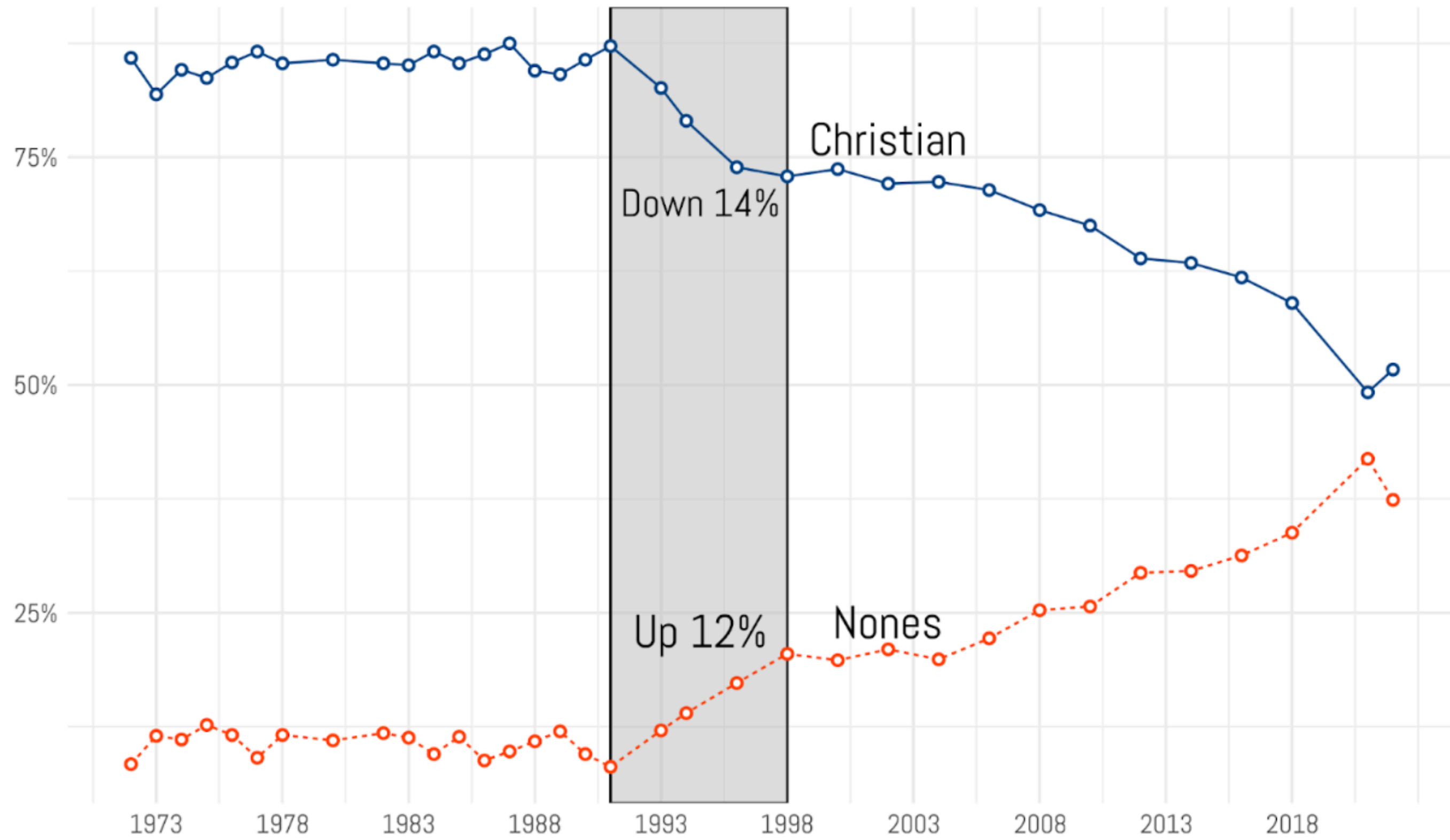


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- Roughly 85% of young adults identified as Christian.
- The non-religious share generally stayed below 10%.
- **Then, in just seven years, the trend lines bent sharply.**



The Religious Affiliation of 18-35 Year Olds




@ryanburge
Data: General Social Survey, 1972-2022





**BETWEEN 1991 AND 1998
AMONG 18–35 YEAR OLDS:**





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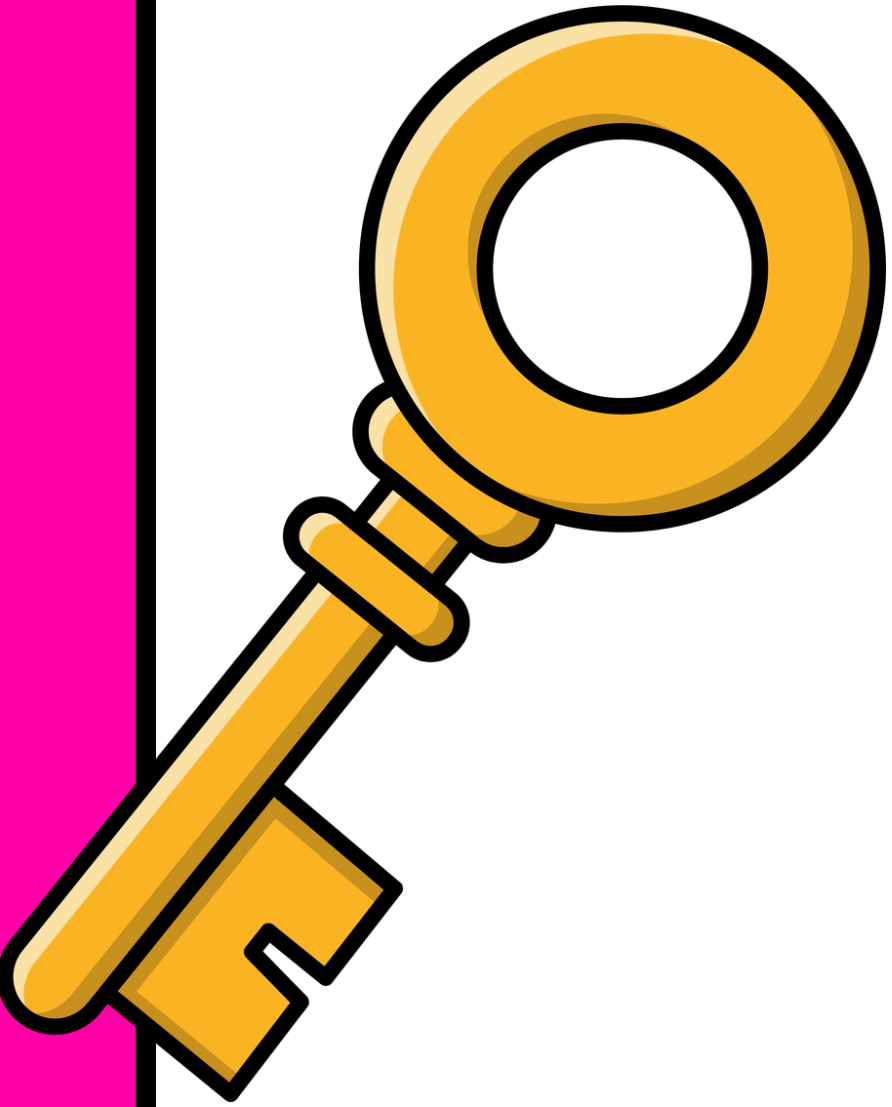




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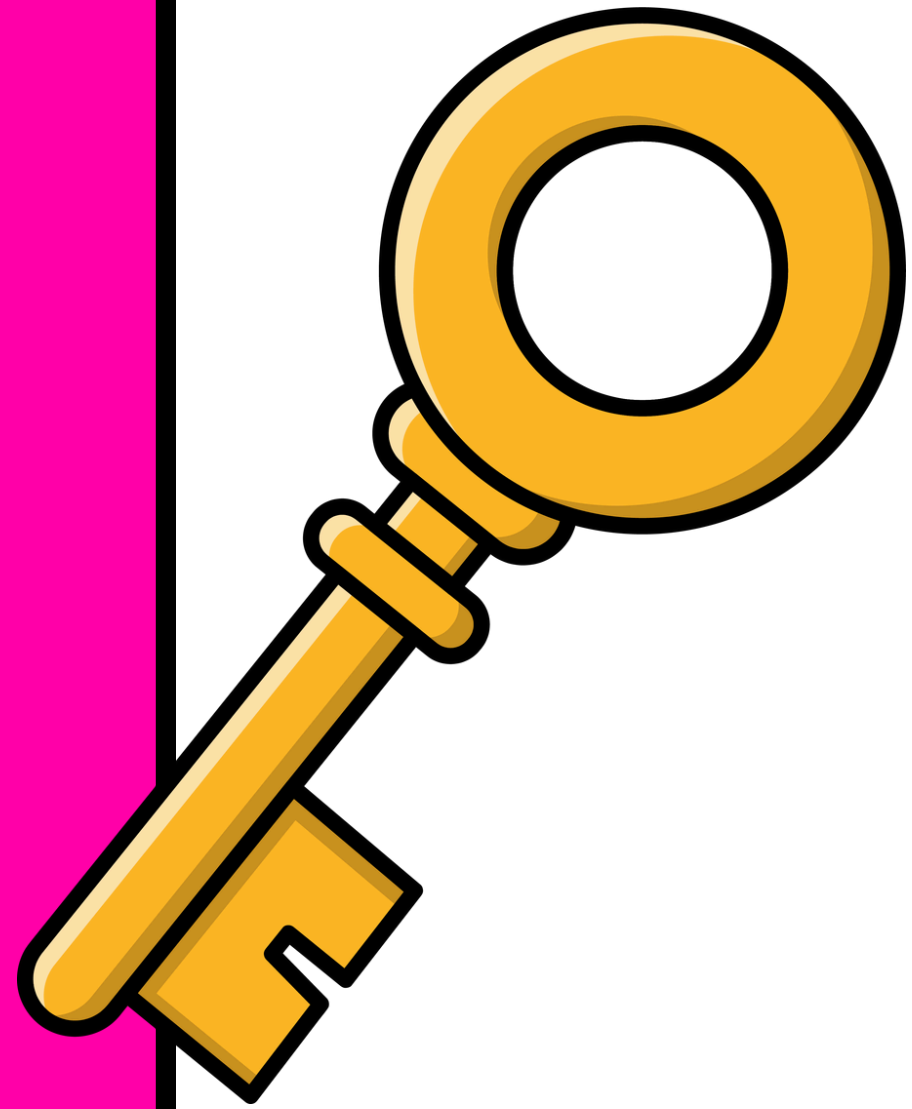
- Christian identification fell from 87% to 73%.
- The nones rose from 8% to 20%.
- **It took until 2018 for those same magnitudes of change to happen again.**





THE KEY POINT:

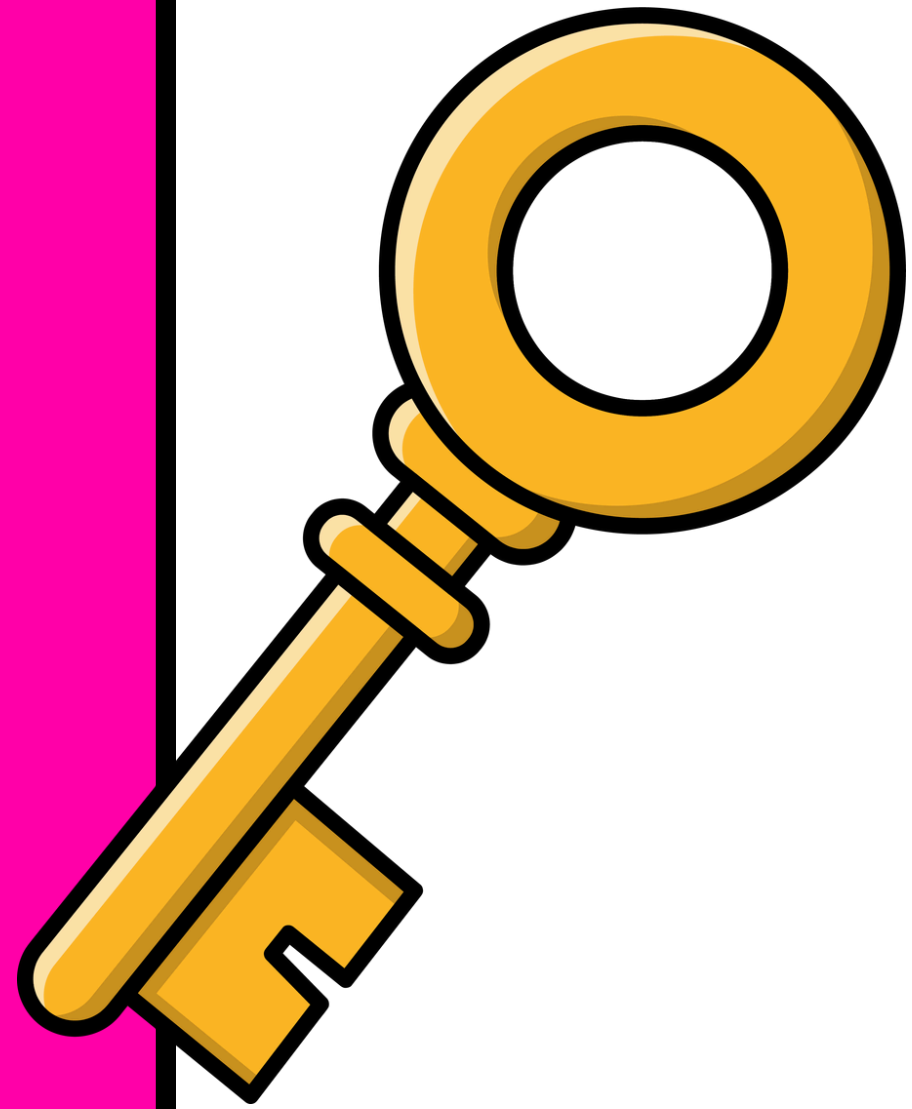




THE KEY POINT:

- **The 1990s were not just another phase of slow decline.**

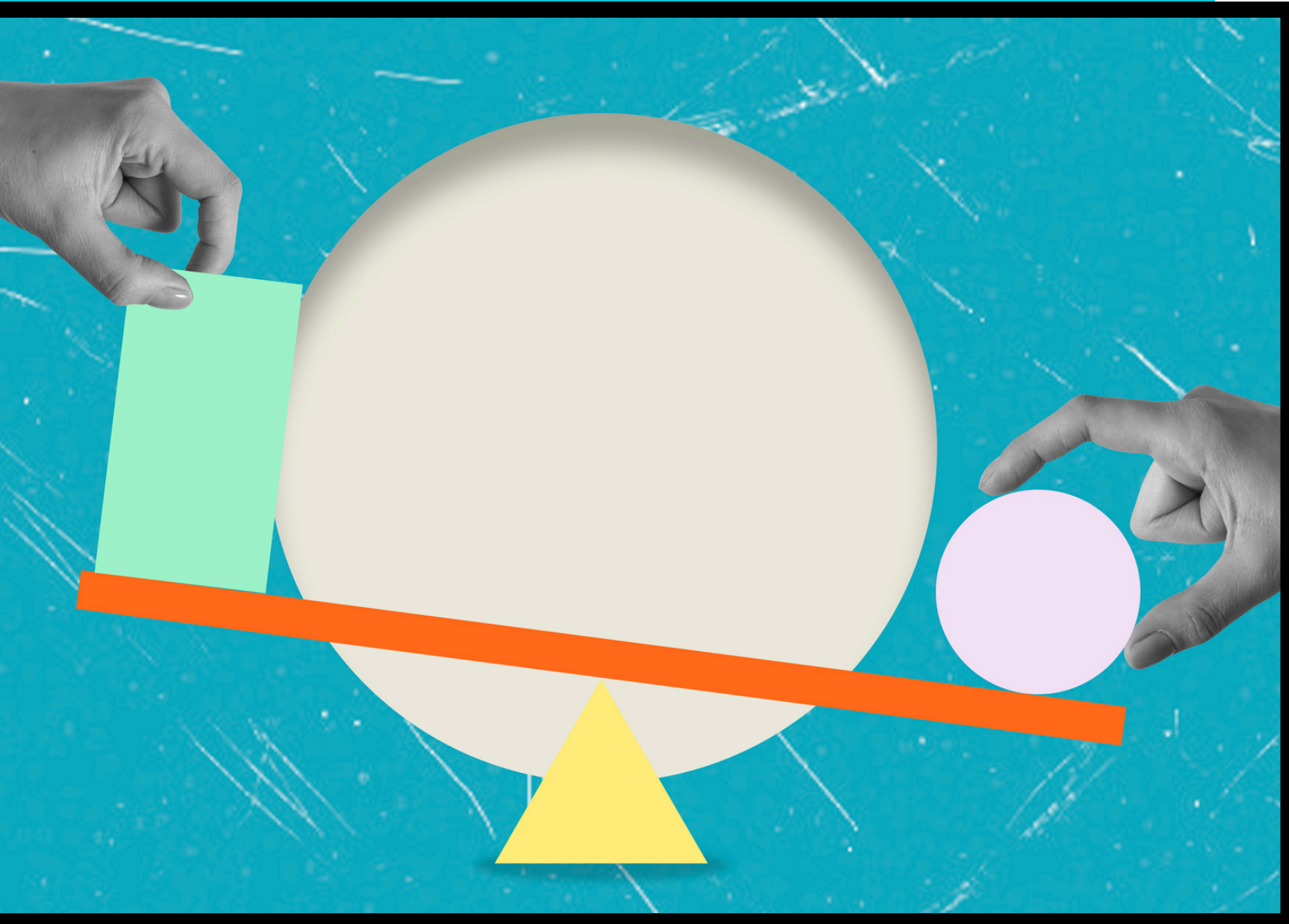




THE KEY POINT:

- The 1990s were not just another phase of slow decline.
- **They were an inflection point.**





**THE 1990s DID NOT JUST
CHANGE AFFILIATION. THEY
CHANGED **BEHAVIOR.****



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 - Weekly attendance dropped from 26% to 22%.
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- **Today, about 40% of young adults say they never attend church services.**



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- They produced weaker habits.
- **Once habits break, rebuilding them is much harder than recovering a nominal identity.**





HERE IS THE **SURPRISE: THIS
WAS NOT ONE GROUP'S
PROBLEM.**





A lot of people assume one tradition collapsed while others held steady. Not true.



**SO WHERE DID THE MASSIVE RISE OF THE NONES
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- The decline was spread across nearly all major Christian traditions.
- This was not “evangelicals were fine while the mainline crashed.”
- **It was a broad weakening of Christian identity among young adults.**





FROM 1991 TO 1998 AMONG YOUNG ADULTS:





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FROM 1991 TO 1998 AMONG YOUNG ADULTS:

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- Mainline Protestants dropped about 3 points.
- **Catholics dropped about 2 points.**





**THE EVANGELICAL STORY IS
MORE **COMPLICATED** THAN
PEOPLE THINK.**

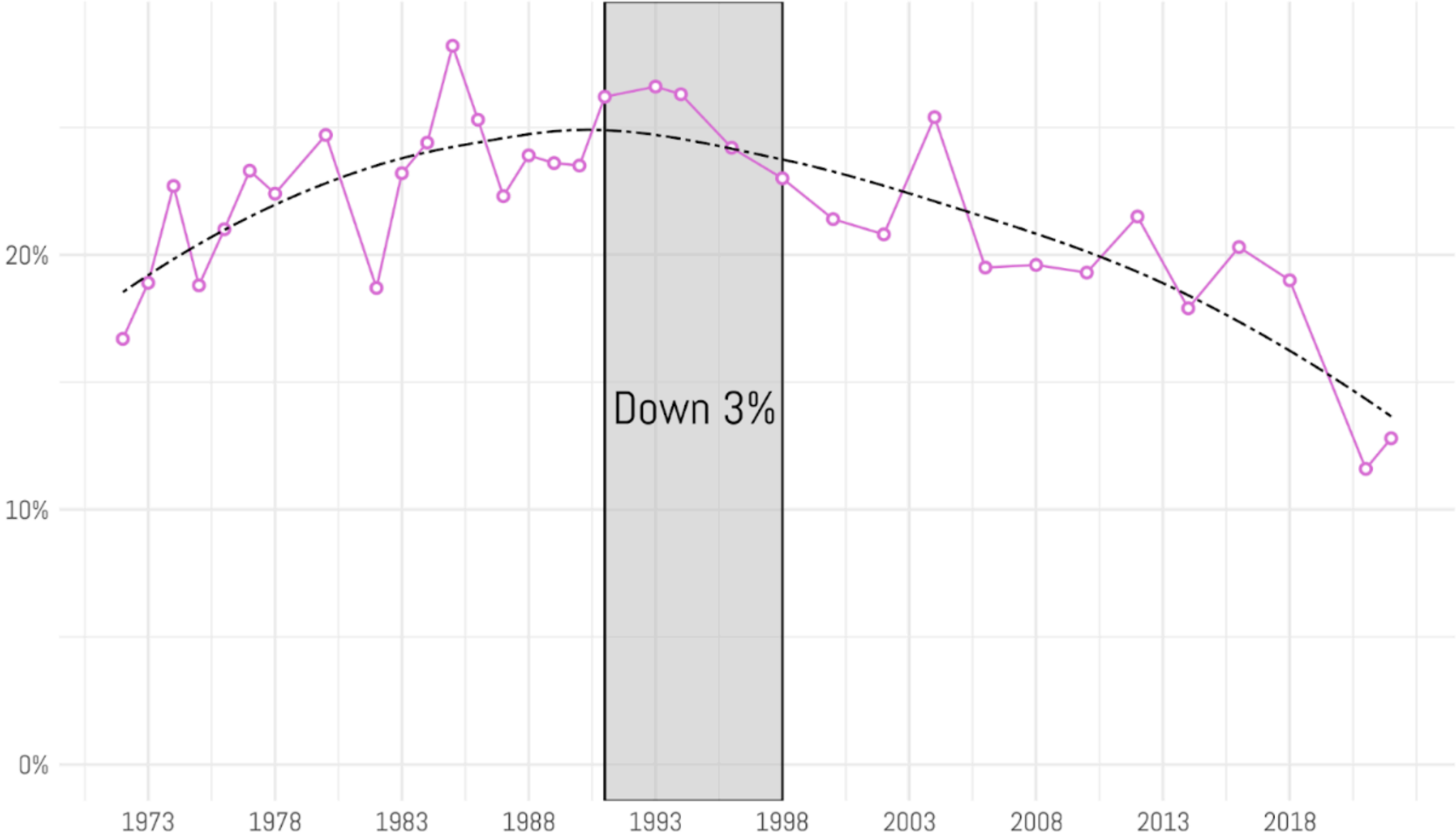




Evangelicalism had a surge before its decline.



The Share of 18-35 Year Olds Who Are Evangelical Protestant



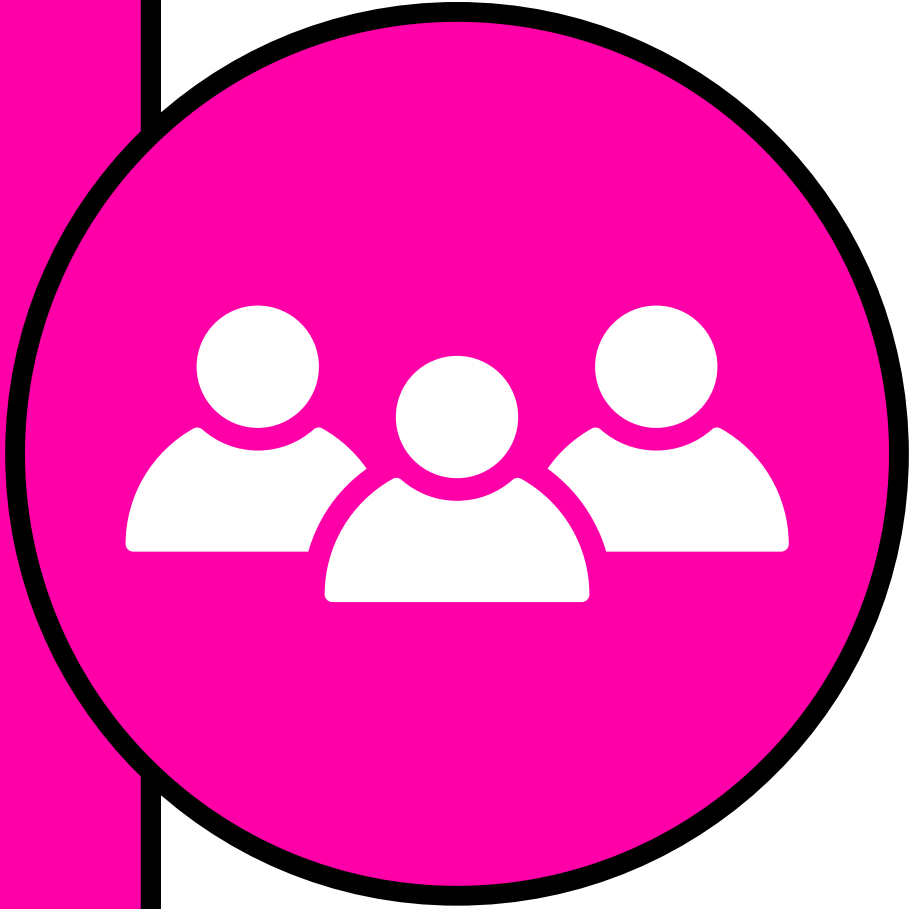
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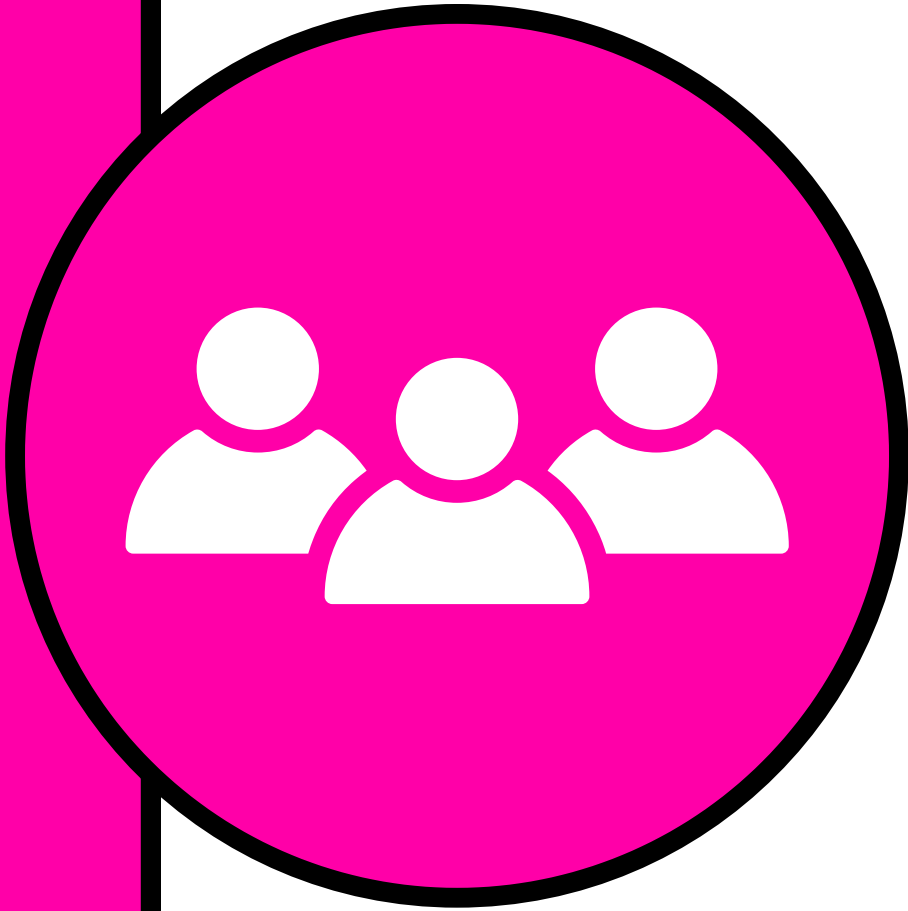
In the country as a whole, evangelicals were about 23% in 1983, peaked at 30% in 1993, and were about 23% again by 2000. From a distance it can look like little changed, but inside that span there was a dramatic rise and fall.





AMONG YOUNG ADULTS:

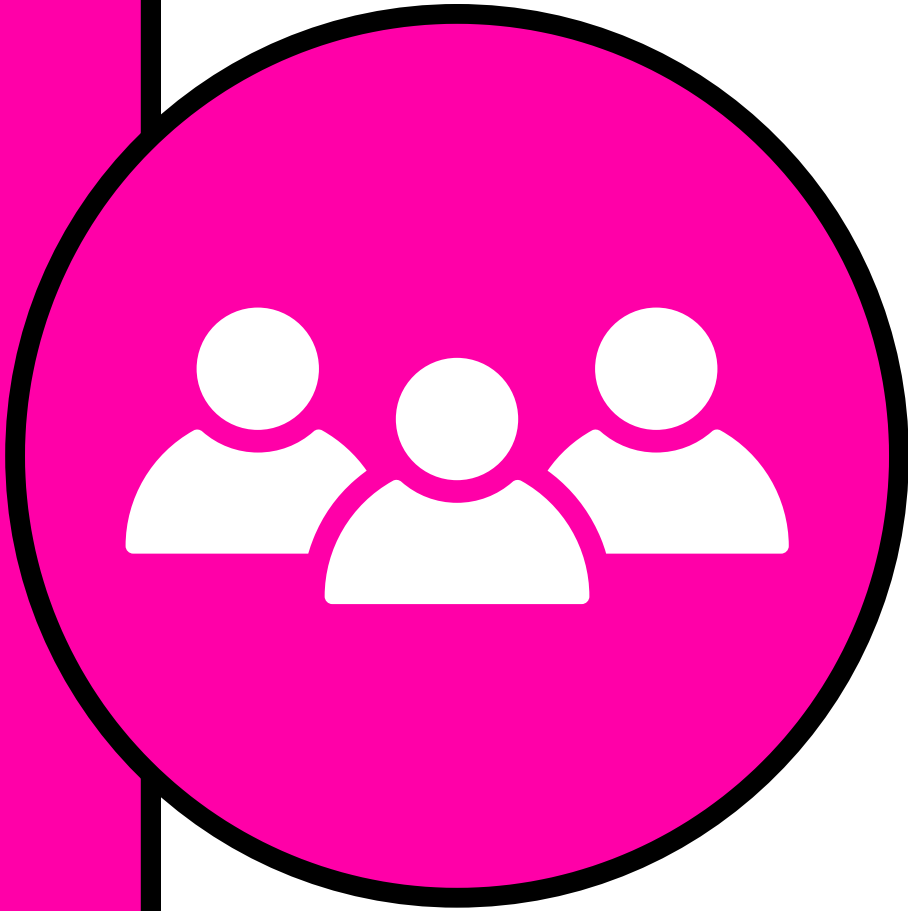




AMONG YOUNG ADULTS:

- **Evangelicals rose from about 20% in the early 1970s to nearly 25% by 1990.**

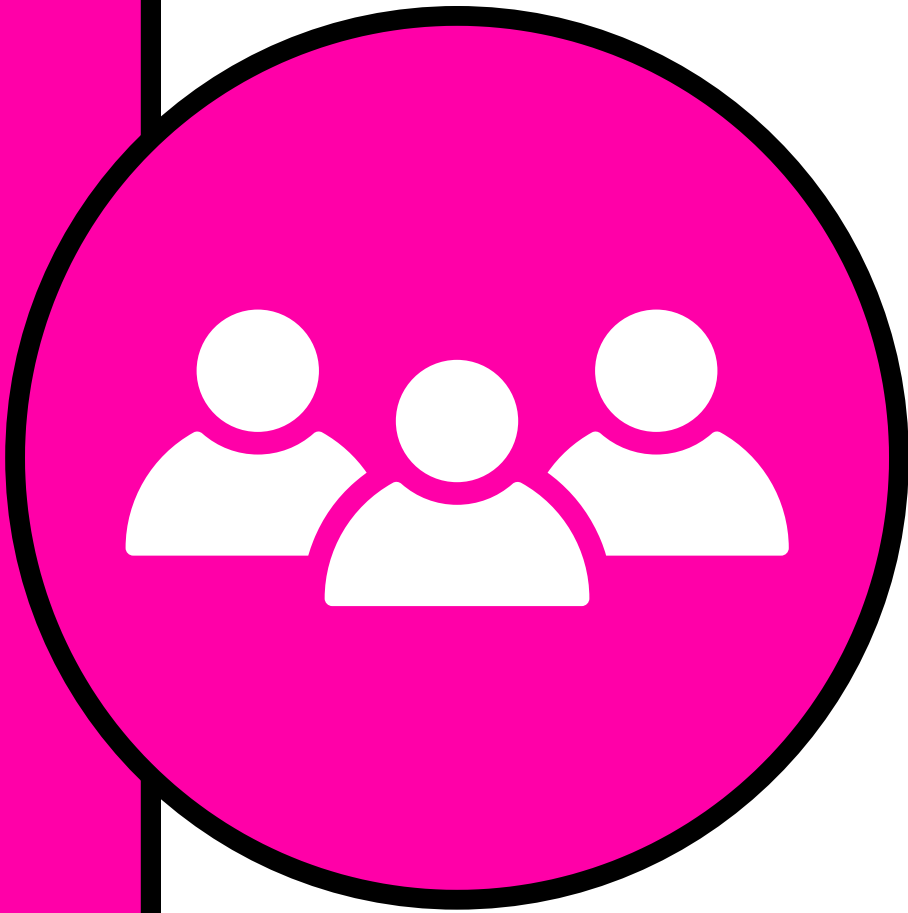




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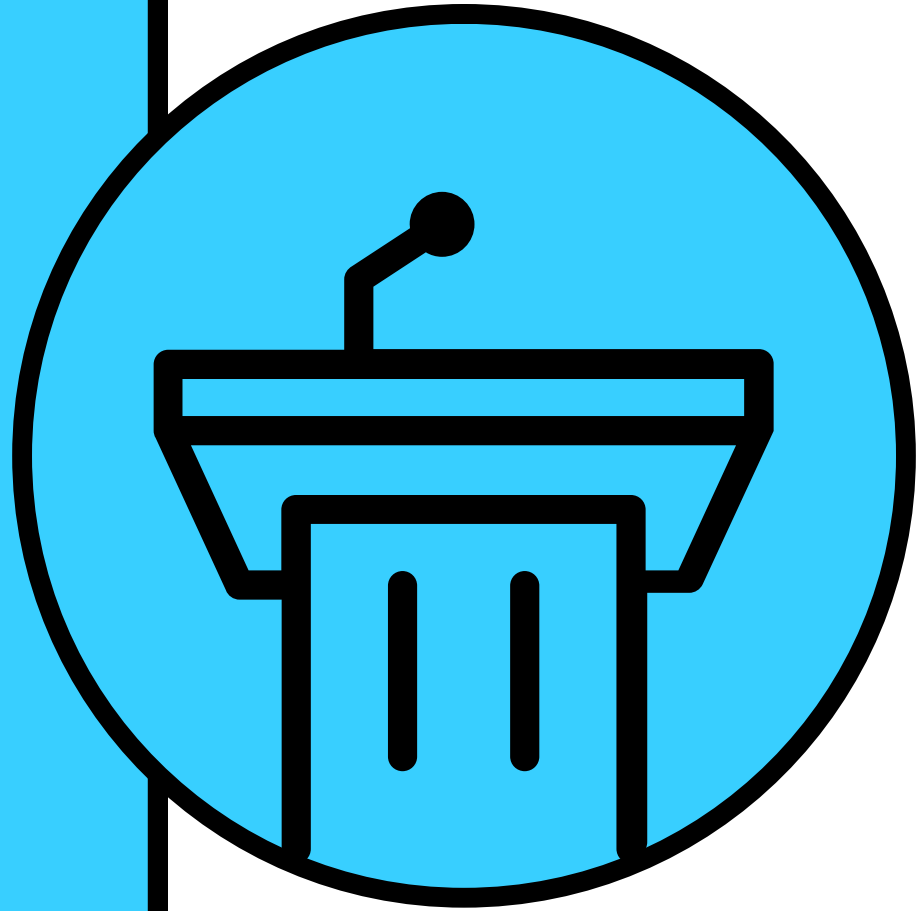




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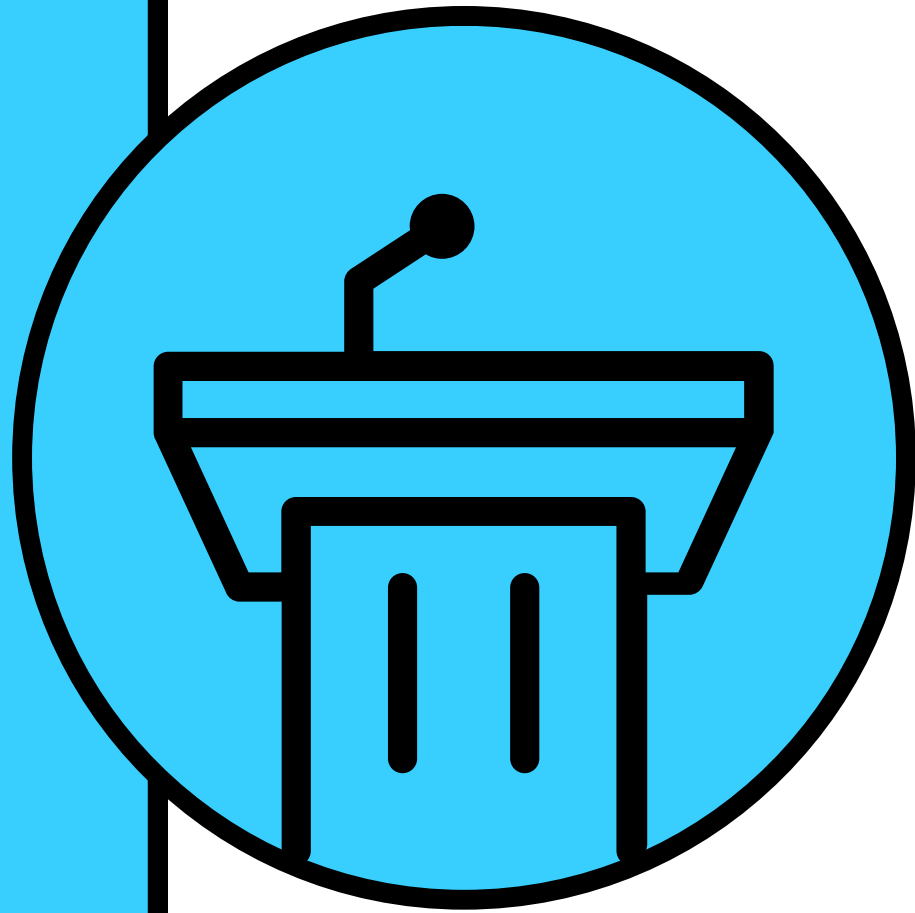
- Evangelicals rose from about 20% in the early 1970s to nearly 25% by 1990.
- During the critical 1991–1998 window, they declined only about 3 points.
- **Today, the young evangelical share is much lower, around 13%.**





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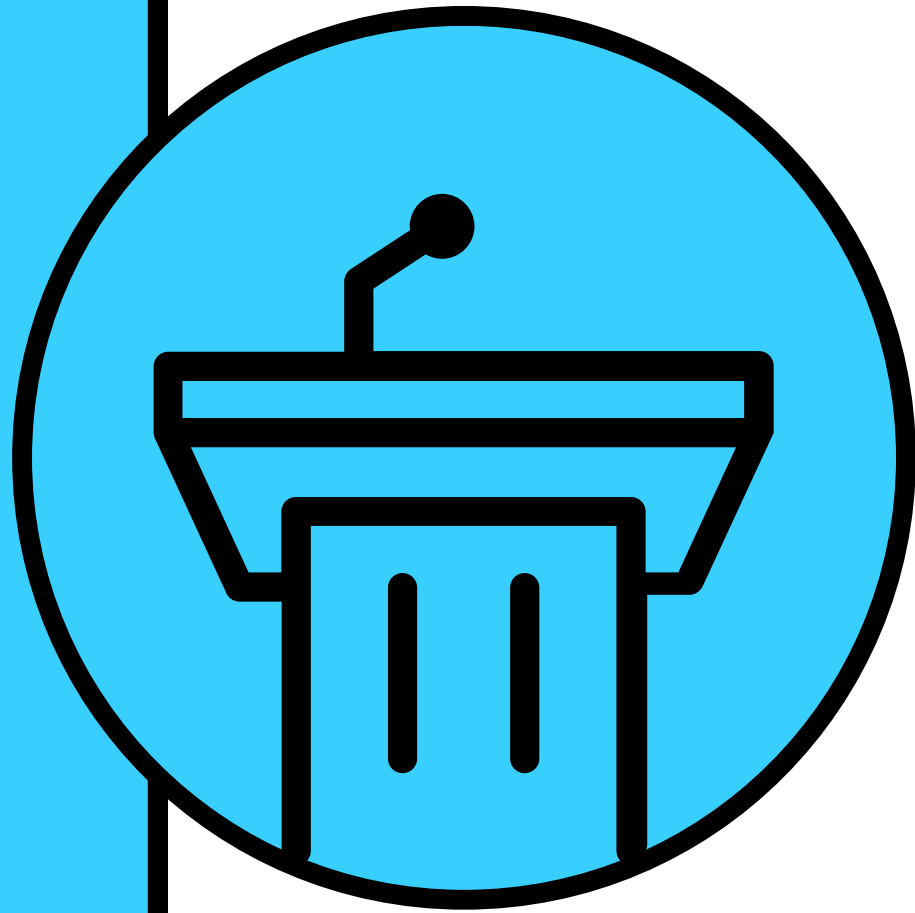




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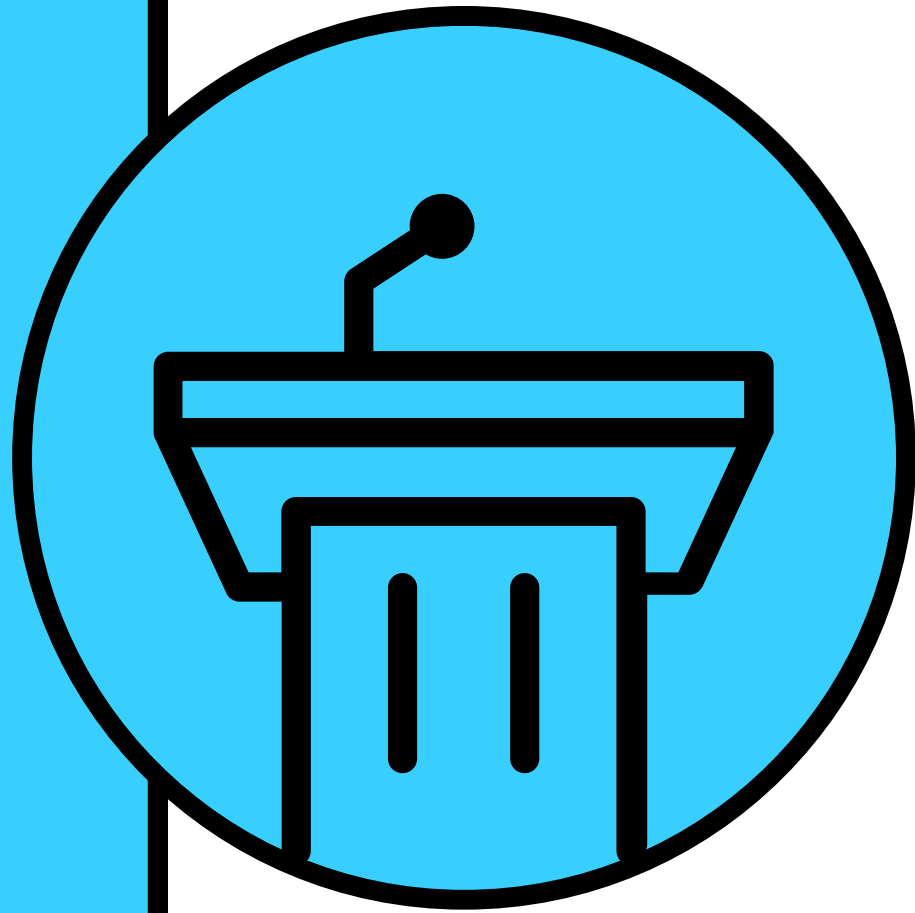




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THIS MATTERS FOR CHURCH LEADERS BECAUSE:

- The 1980s and early 1990s created a sense of evangelical momentum.
- Many churches mistook a temporary surge for a permanent advantage.
- **The institutions built during the surge later faced a very different environment.**

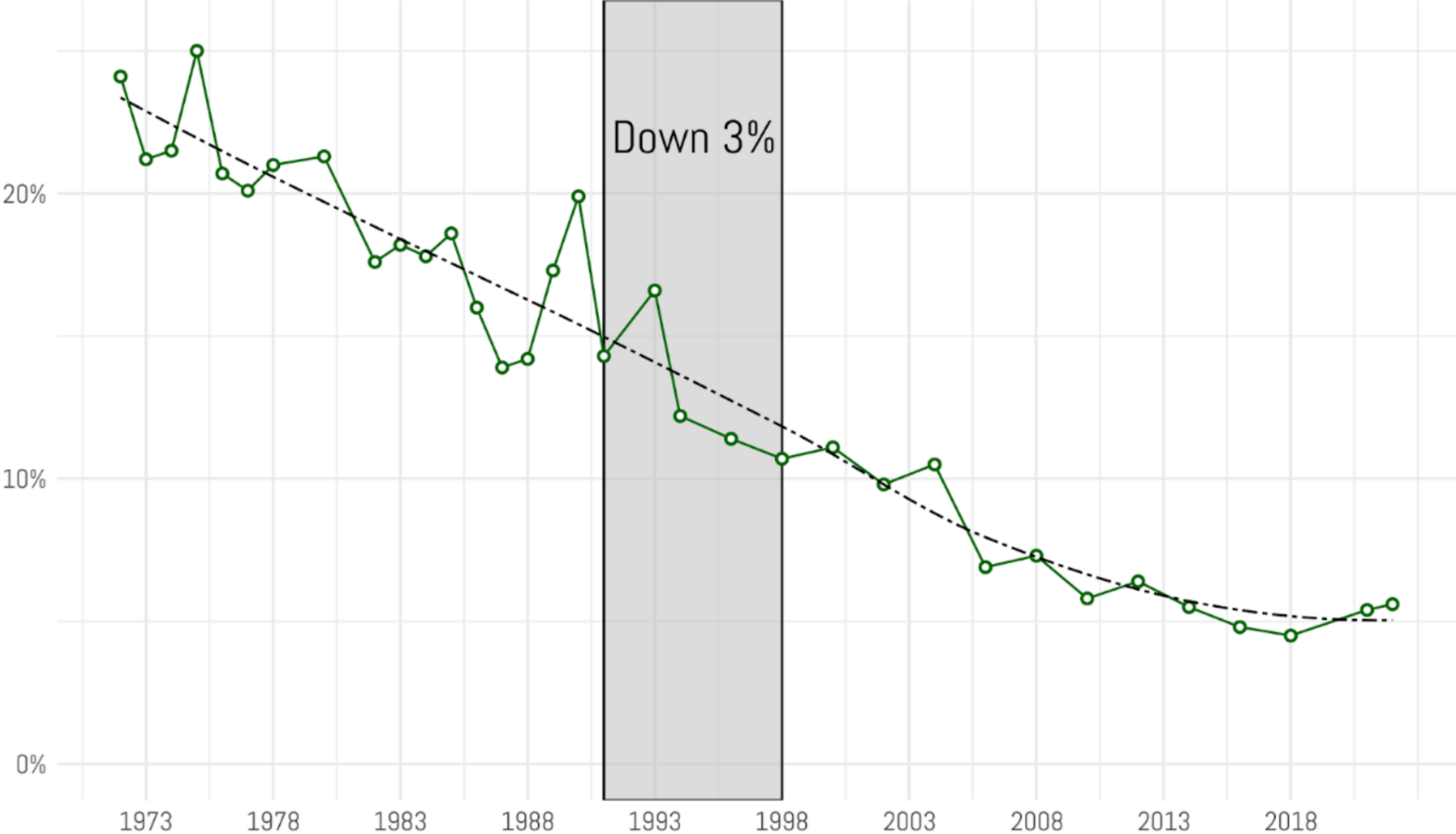




**THE EVANGELICAL ARC *vs.*
THE MAINLINE SKI SLOPE**



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WHY DID THE 1990s **SHIFT
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SOCIAL CAPITAL FADED AND THIRD PLACE CHANGED





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- **The mall effect: Church was no longer the hub of connection.**

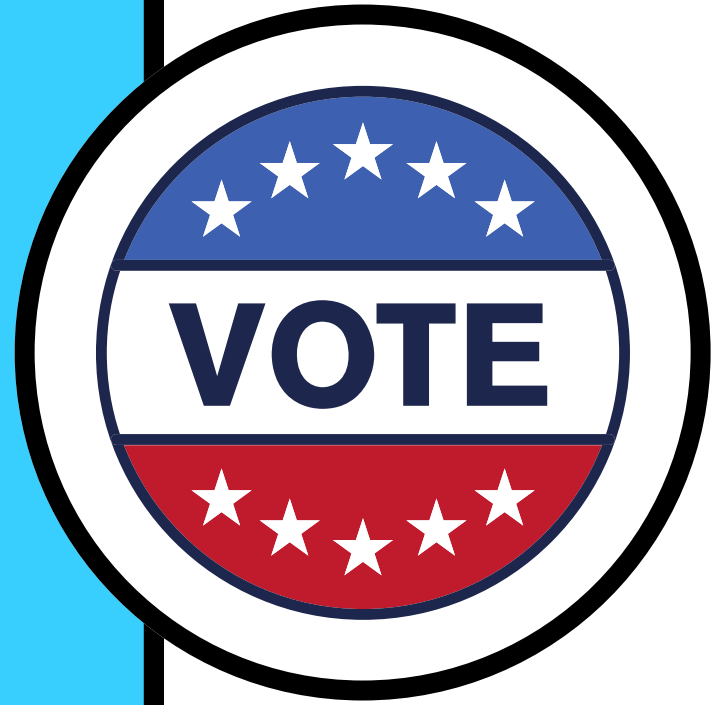




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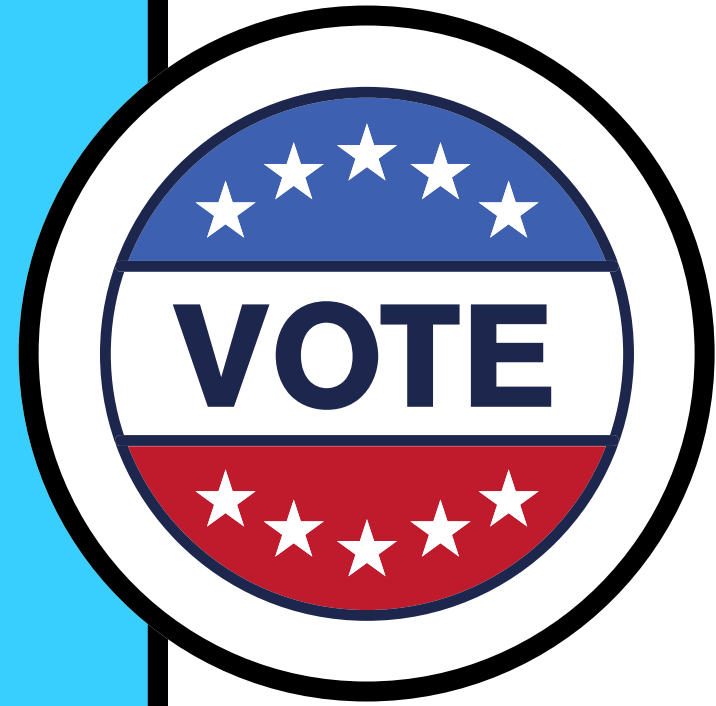
- The mall effect: Church was no longer the hub of connection.
- **The culture war effect: Young people were forced to take sides.**





POLITICAL POLARIZATION INTENSIFIED

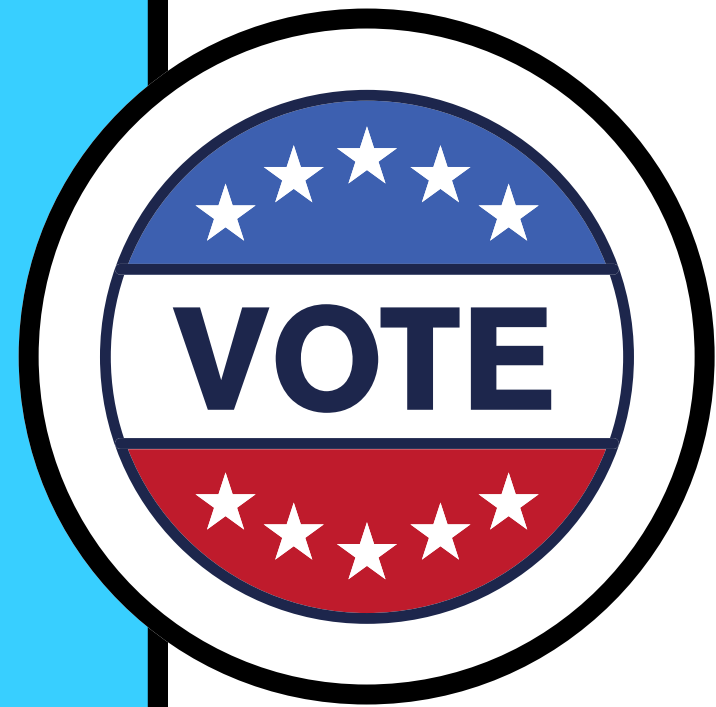




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- **The culture became more morally and politically sorted.**





POLITICAL POLARIZATION INTENSIFIED

- The culture became more morally and politically sorted.
- **Some chose to leave church rather than stay in a politicized environment.**





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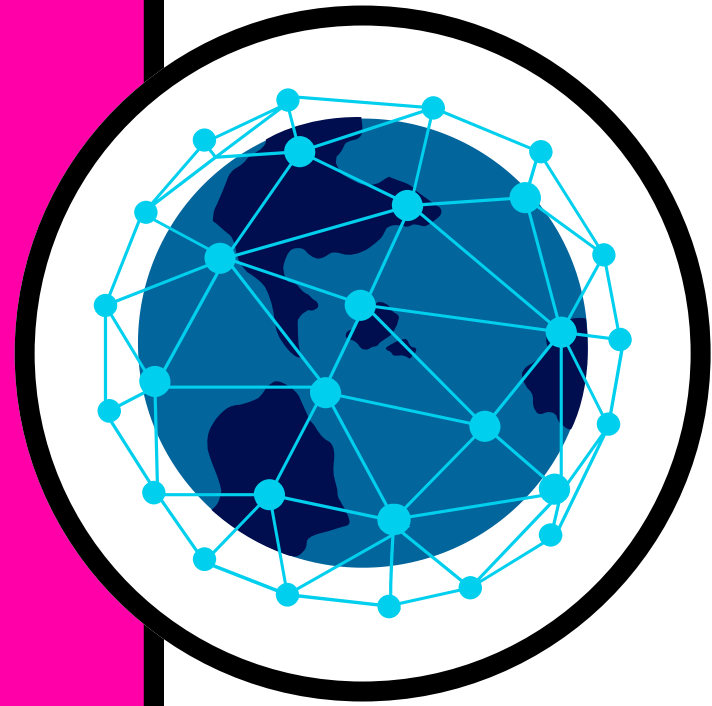




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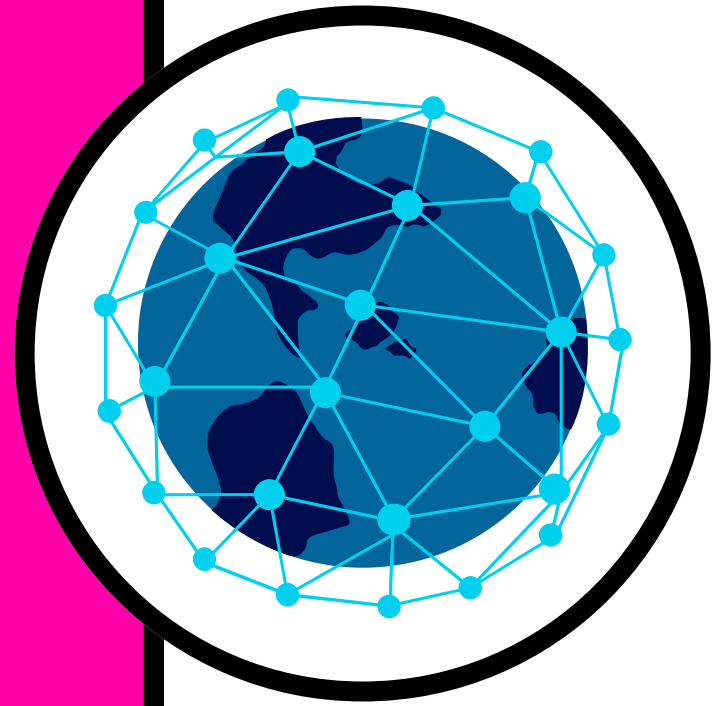
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- **The category of “none” became easier to claim.**





THE INTERNET CHANGED ACCESS TO BELIEF AND DOUBT

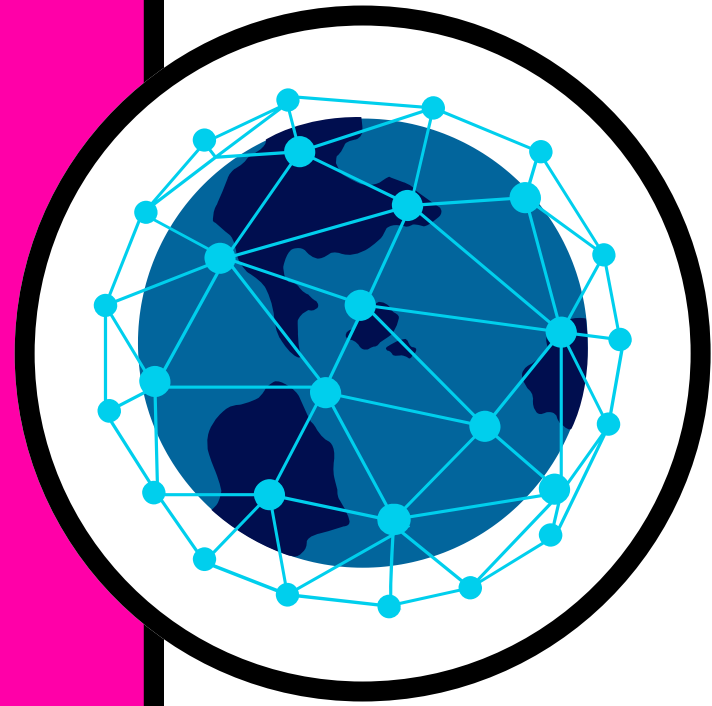




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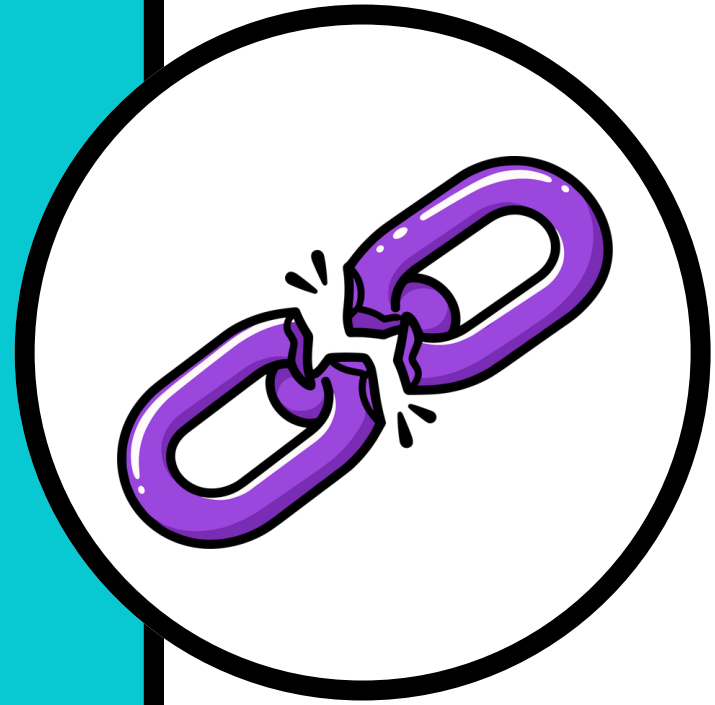




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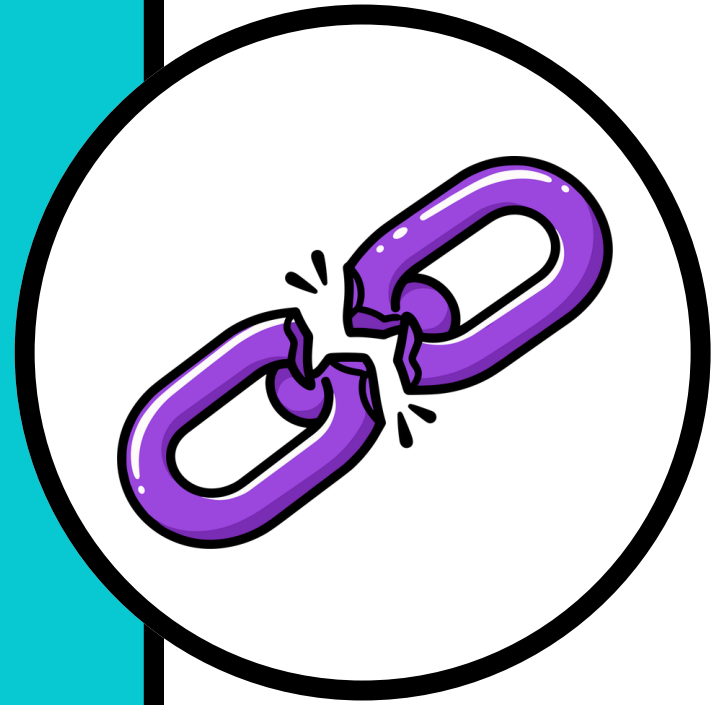
- Young adults could investigate faith for themselves.
- **They could compare worldviews, churches, and criticisms of religion more easily.**





A GENERATION BROKE THE TRANSMISSION CHAIN

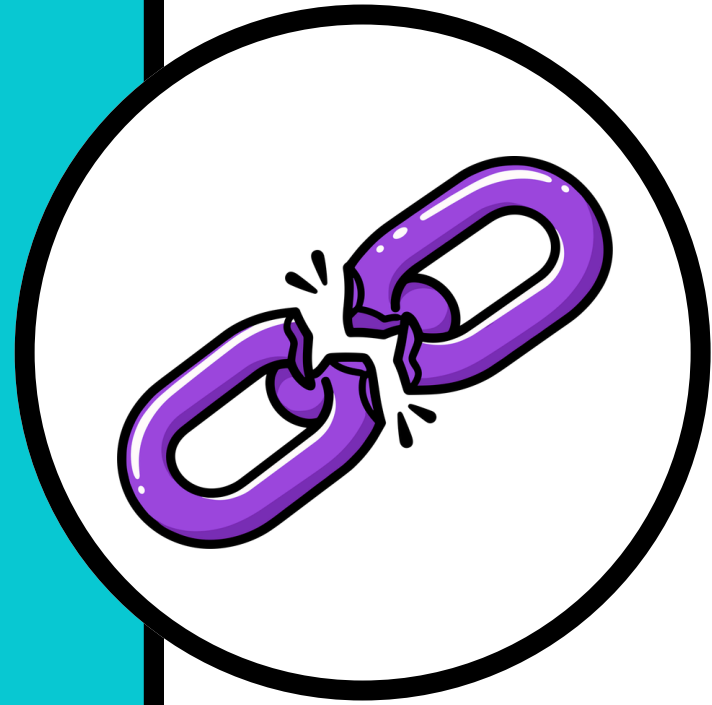




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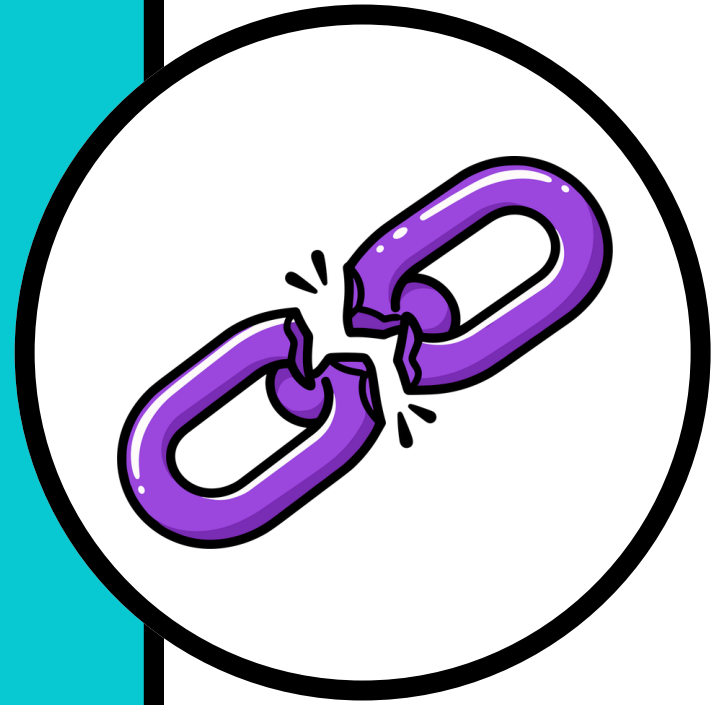




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- Those children were more likely to be raised without religion than prior generations.
- **That helps explain why the rise of the nones became self-reinforcing.**





WHY THIS MATTERS FOR PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS **NOW**





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WHY THIS MATTERS FOR PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS **NOW**

- The lesson is not “the church is doomed.”
- The lesson is that many current church trends are not new.
- **They are the downstream effects of changes that began three decades ago.**





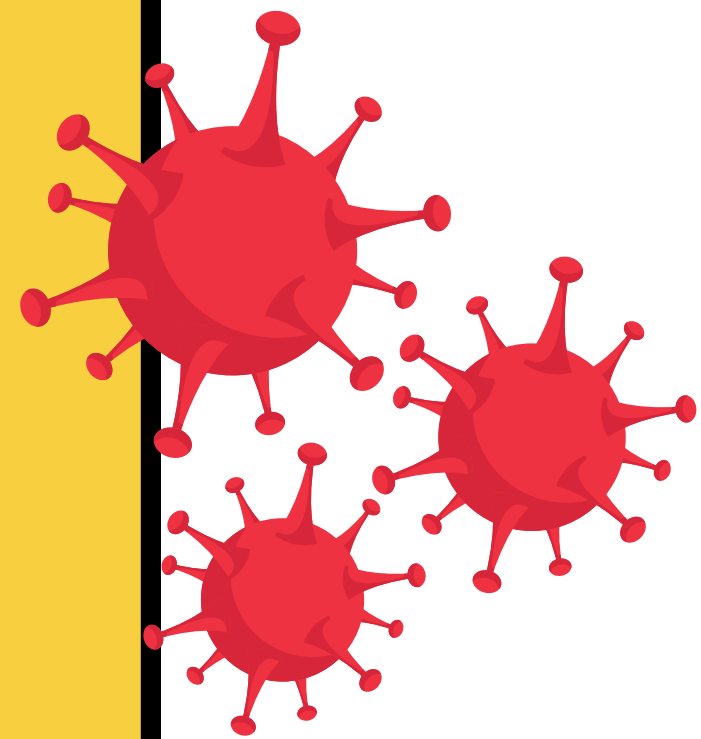
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCHES **TODAY:**





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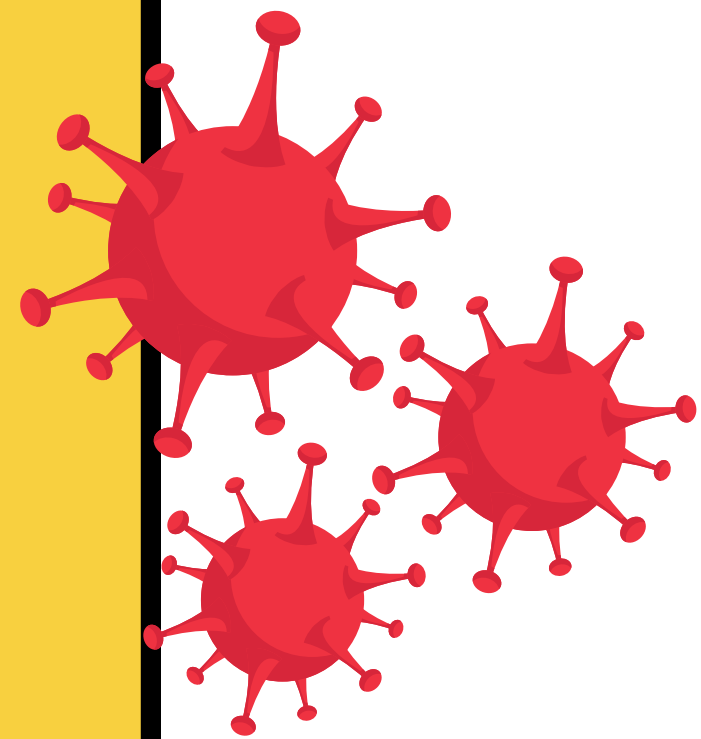




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- **Good diagnosis requires a longer historical lens.**





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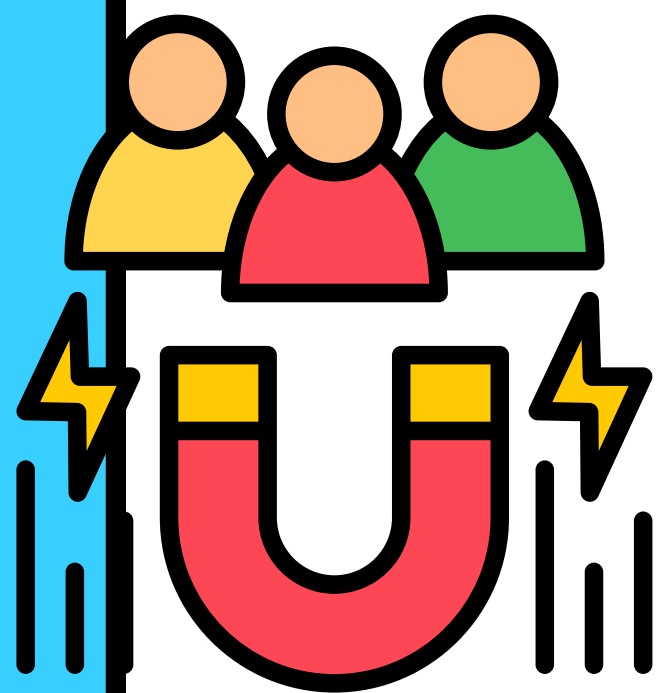




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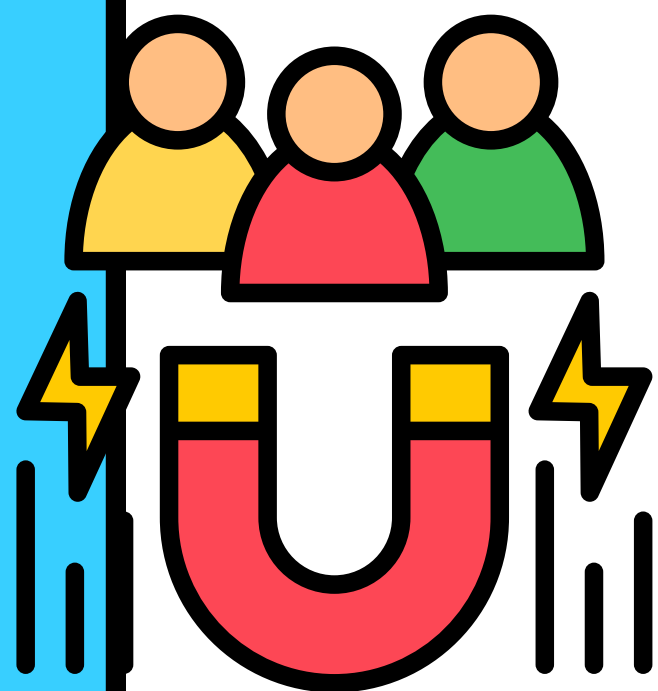
- The old cultural floor is gone.
- Churches cannot assume inherited identity.
- **Evangelism and discipleship have to do more of the work.**





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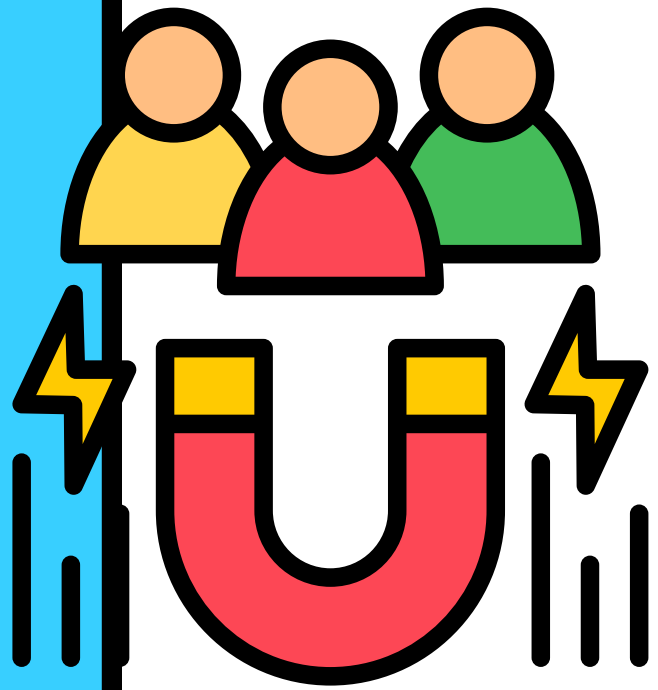




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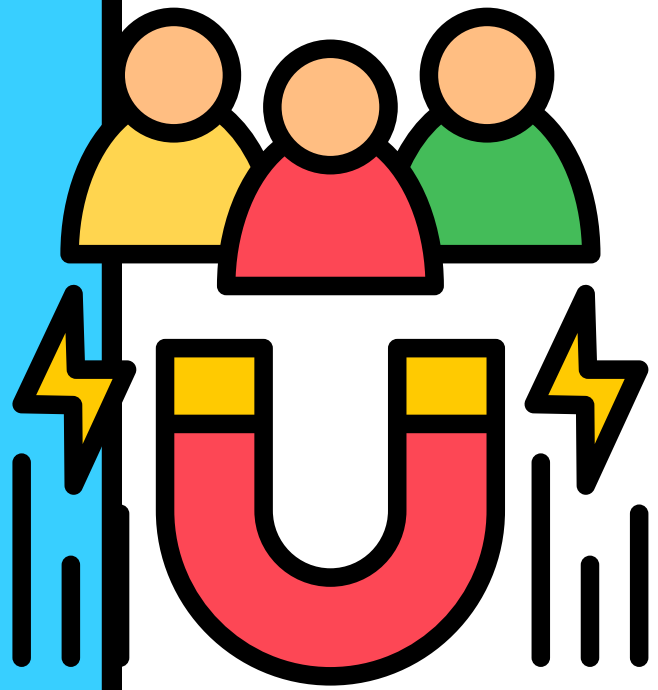




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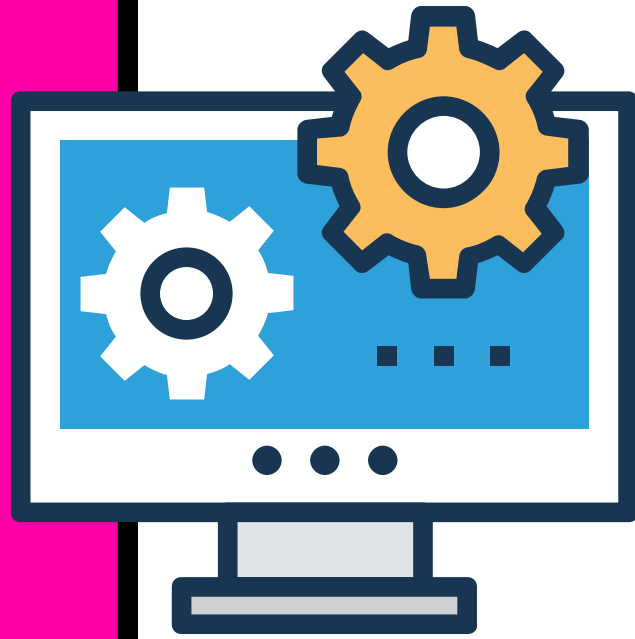




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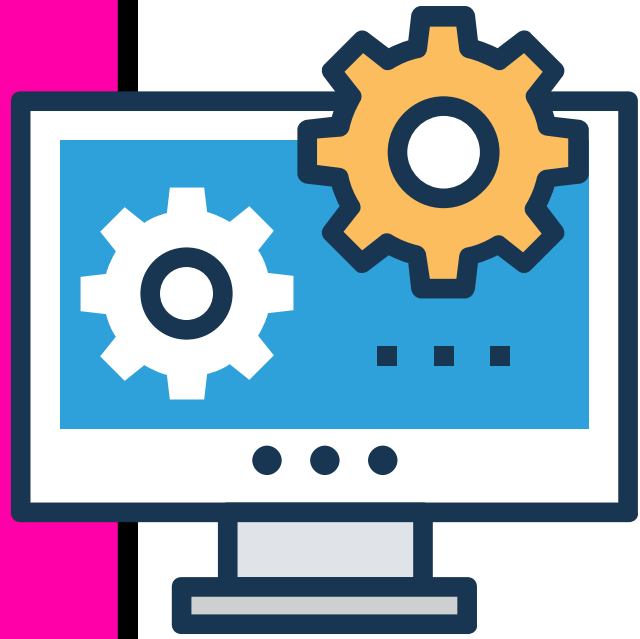
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- **Since mobility rates are way down, keeping your children is more possible than ever.**





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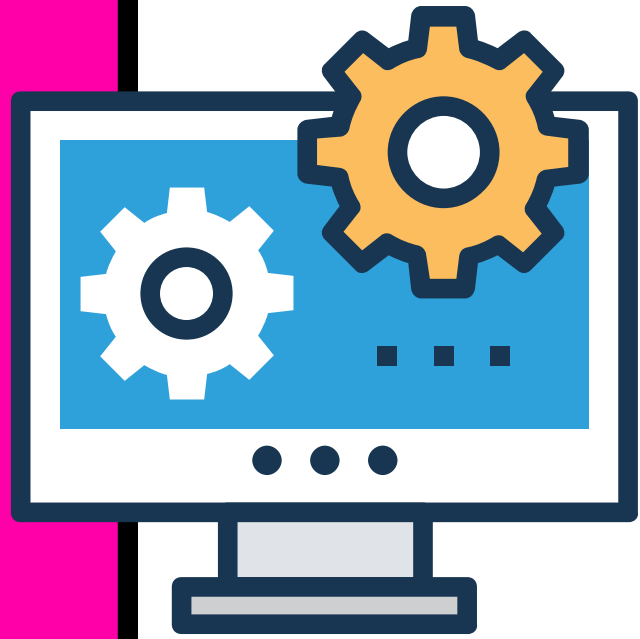




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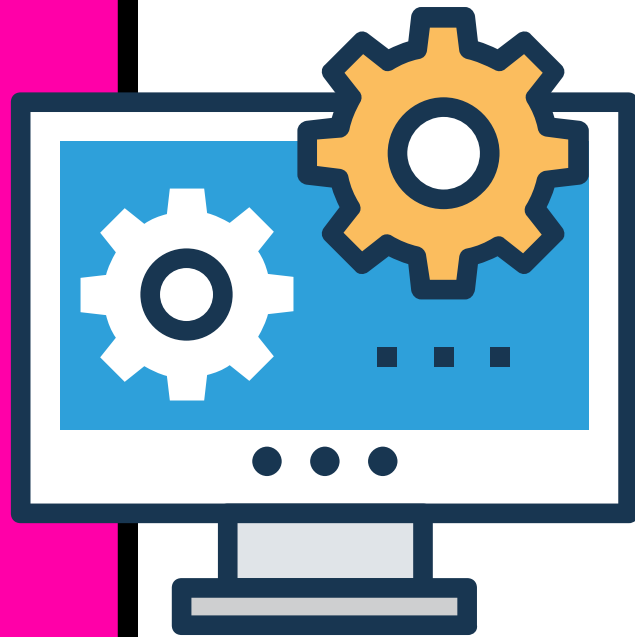




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- You need to know how to read demographic and religious data.
- **Wise ministry now requires both theology and social analysis.**





The 1990s did not finish the story of American religion. But the decade changed the trajectory of the story.





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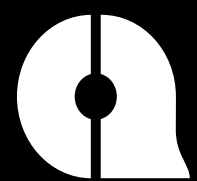




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QUESTIONS?



CHURCH ANSWERS

THANK YOU!



 **CHURCH ANSWERS**