

Is This Concerning Trend the Reason So Many Are Leaving American Church?

Up until I was 30(ish) I was a regular attendee of church. Then four years ago, I stopped going almost entirely.

I was made to go to church until I was 16. Then I was given the choice and continued going because all my friends and the girl I fancied went. Essentially church was a social—and not worshipful—experience for me.

Then at the ripe age of 20, I had my own “Damascus Road experience” and the rest, as they say, is history.

But that didn’t solve my problem with church, and despite becoming a youth pastor on two occasions, I still found church nauseating.

In my younger days, I was a rebel without a cause, but that could be silenced (or humbled) when I stood before the authentic. Like the moment I truly realized I needed a Savior or if I met someone who was undeniably a friend of God.

So why did I find church so difficult?

Hypocrisy was a big one. It irked me when I heard a sermon that mentioned King David, who besides being a “man after God’s heart,” was also a murderer and adulterer. Yet I saw the church conveniently forget that part of the story when a leader of their own failed morally and was quickly and quietly shown the back door.

Or perhaps it was because I found the whole event of going to church on Sundays pretty disingenuous. Having been involved in church as a congregant, youth pastor, elder and confidant of leaders, I found it difficult to reconcile what I heard from

the pulpit and saw behind the scenes. Marriages in disarray, depression, but the person pretending that everything was OK, or placing more emphasis on numbers than Jesus.

Yes, I found both of those things hard to stomach, but it still didn't scratch the itch I had until I was best man at a wedding.

Weddings are a time to celebrate especially for one of my best friends whose journey up to the altar had been a bumpy one. I do not believe my actions during the service were obnoxious, but at one point when I clapped or cheered at something too loudly, someone turned to me and asked me to calm down.

Despite my better instincts, partly out of respect but also shame, I did. That moment has stuck with me ever since because it perfectly illustrated my problem with the church: It loves being respectable.

The dictionary defines respectable as "being good, proper or correct." I have no problem with that. After all, I like walking into a coffee shop and being able to order a cup of coffee, smile at the barista, pay my money—give a tip—and then enjoy my beverage without challenge while engaging in mild pleasantries.

But is that how a church service is meant to be? If it is, then I'm reading the wrong Bible.

Jesus had no problem throwing shade at all the respected norms of his day, most notably how the Pharisees had perverted the Sabbath to control people.

Oh, and what about the time when He walked into the temple with a whip and kicked out all the merchants and money-traders, or the time He asked who His mother and brothers were. The list could go on but what becomes clear from reading the gospels is that Jesus was not a respecter of people, or more importantly social norms, if it got in the way of the

message He had for the world. And unlike me, He was guileless, had a pure heart and mandate from God. His mission was life for the world.

He came to tear down the veil, to reestablish the relationship to tell the people of this world, as He did the woman at the well, that it wasn't about this or that building, it was about Him living inside of us so we could worship Him in spirit and truth. It wasn't just about being saved, it was about continual transformation.

Yet, despite being so offensive, those who were willing to truly listen with an open heart often chose to stay close to Jesus. Like Peter, who told Jesus in John 6:68: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." As an aside, Peter would be most pastors' worse nightmare, yet he was Jesus' best friend.

So, why is it that every Sunday we are happy to attend an event that is more like visiting a coffee shop than being in the presence of Jesus?

Because buying a coffee isn't offensive. It's a wholly respectable experience for the customer—or consumer—and remember, the customer's always right.

But that's not the gospel. For example, read the passage about the prostitute who anoints Jesus (Luke 7:36-50). She pours oil over Jesus' feet when He was having supper at Simon the Pharisee's house. Simon is offended that a sinful woman is in His house and what's more that Jesus would let her anoint Him. Jesus then tells Simon a parable, using debt as the symbol for sin. Needless to say, Simon gets put in his place, and the prostitute does what Simon never even thought to do: She abandoned what dignity she had left and offensively worshipped Jesus while Simon was content to keep up appearances.

Michael Miller, pastor of Upperroom, Dallas, preached on this passage profoundly and pointed out something that I've never

noticed before, which I think is key to why coffee shop church has endured for so long. Miller points out that Simon invited Jesus over to his house, and Jesus came, and that's what he thinks happens every Sunday across this nation. We invite Jesus to our respectable, inoffensive meetings and Jesus graciously comes, expectant that maybe this will be the day it'll be different.

Yet how did Jesus respond to Simon's offense and the prostitute's adoration?

Do you see this woman? I entered your house. You gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with ointment. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little loves little (Luke 7:36-50).

Nothing about what the prostitute did was respectable. She didn't even say the sinners' prayer. Yet, to Jesus, her worship was the standard. Not because he needed it but because she was giving back to Him the love and acceptance she felt from Him and no one else.

So where does this leave us?

Well, people are leaving American churches in droves. At first, I was dismayed to hear this news, but after more consideration, I'm actually excited and hopeful.

Because what it means is that the old model is dying and in its place will rise up an authentic, real and power-filled expression of church. We are being called back to our first love and our Savior's first commandment to us which was to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your

soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind”
(Luke 10:27a).

I believe we will see unprecedented numbers of people discover the same Jesus that the prostitute in all her brokenness and vulnerability did and, not the one Simon wanted to host at a respectful distance. {eoa}

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