

Which One of These 8 Reasons Is Really Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church?

Many young people are leaving Evangelical churches. Statistics vary, but there is general consensus that large numbers of post-high school age Evangelical youth shed the faith of their fathers and mothers upon beginning their college years.

The reasons given are multiple. They include such things as over-identification of older Evangelicals as angry Right-wingers who disdain homosexuals and are skeptical of global warming; a subculture that is unwelcoming to the young and secular; Christianity's claim of exclusivity as to truth and salvation; and the general superficiality of the preaching and teaching.

Summing up much of this line of thinking, Carol Howard Merritt writes, "There are three major reasons that a younger generation is leaving Evangelicalism: pernicious sexism, religious intolerance, and conservative politics"

Yet this analysis, so neat and damning (and, for critics of Evangelicalism, rewardingly severe), seems woefully incomplete.

First, the idea that younger Evangelicals are jettisoning their youthful faith could well be overstated. University of Connecticut sociologist Bradley Wright, author of *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites and Other Lies You've Been Told*, challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the young and Evangelical Protestantism:

Evangelicalism increased among all age groups from 1972 through the early 1990s, and it has decreased in all groups since then. The differences exist in rates of change, namely

it's dropped among young people faster than older people. It's worth noting, however that the biggest drop of faith in young people happened in the 1990s, and that current levels are about the same as the early 1970s.

Still, this doesn't alleviate the fact that a noticeable number of younger Evangelicals are departing from the pews in which they were raised. Let's also agree that the verbal and political excesses of some Evangelical conservative leaders have been off-putting and that personal friendships with gay men and lesbians make younger believers alert to real and perceived insults by believers of homosexuals.

But is the (supposed) ecclesiastical exodus of collegiate and post-collegiate Evangelicals really as simple as disgust with the excesses of political conservatism, discomfort with Christianity's claim of exclusivity regarding the path to salvation, a desire to "live green," and simply get along in an adverse society?

I propose several other reasons why some young people are leaving their Evangelical heritage. They are these:

1. Evangelical churches try so hard to be palatable and relevant that we become distasteful and irrelevant.

Desperate contemporaneity has become the coin of the age as Evangelicals make gasping efforts to draw in the disaffected. We preach on methods of achieving various kinds of success (with one or two Bible verses thrown in) instead of the books and themes of Scripture. We have become what Michael Patton calls "the entertainment driven church." After awhile, manic superficiality in the name of "relevance" induces cynicism, and rightfully so. As described by Alan Jamieson, "the institutional church" has become "irrelevant or unhelpful ... for so many reflective and intelligent believers today" (quoted in Julia Duin, *Quitting Church*, p. 175).

"We've taken a historic, 2,000 year old faith, dressed it in plaid and skinny jeans and tried to sell it as 'cool' to our kids," writes Marc Yoder. "It's not cool. It's not modern. What we're packaging is a cheap knockoff of the world we're called to evangelize."

This plunge into irrelevance through "relevance at any cost" is the fruit of a tepid theology and only further weakens the orthodox spine. This theological weakness is augmented by something we find decidedly uncomfortable raising: the sin of Eden, also known as pride. As an anonymous contributor to "Juicy Ecumenism" has written caustically:

A lot of people come up to me at conferences, to which, as a very successful hipster-progressive post-evangelical blogger, I have been invited to speak, asking me how they, too, can make a name for themselves as a voice for the disaffected semi-faithful ... The trick of post-evangelical blogging is to take the issue du jour, be it gay marriage, birth control, gun control, abortion, or assisted suicide, and re-interpret it as a fundamental and authentic challenge to the assumptions of the suburban evangelicalism which for you represents the sum total of Christian belief and experience.

As King's College President Gregory Alan Thornbury writes, "If we cannot reconcile our theology with the sturdy basis for biblical Christianity that framed evangelicalism and once made it great, we will find ourselves and our children cut loose from our tradition" (*Recovering Classic Evangelicalism*, p. 208). This result must be unacceptable to those born of the Spirit.

2. Evangelical leaders too often don't preach/teach on the essential doctrines of Scripture because of their lack of confidence in the power of God's Word to transform and because they don't want to offend.

Many people sitting in the pews of theologically orthodox Protestant churches would have difficulty offering a simple explanation of the Trinity and why understanding the Triune nature of God is important. They have neither been taught these things nor had explained to them why they are critical to Christian living.

In 2000, the British pastor Phil Newton wrote, "The issue in preaching is proclaiming faithfully, accurately, and clearly the Word of God, so that the truth of the Word penetrates the mind to affect the heart, rather than the cleverness of the preacher impressing the hearers. At the core of all a preacher does is to dig deeply into the given text of Scripture, seeking to understand it grammatically, historically, and doctrinally." In the intervening years, too few have heeded his exhortation.

Instead, Evangelicals too often have followed the counsel of Screwtape, writing of Jesus to the junior demon Wormwood: "We (must) distract men's minds from Who He is, and what He did. We first make Him solely a teacher ... all great moralists are sent (by God), not to inform men, but to remind them, to restate the primeval moral platitudes."

As David F. Wells has written, "the Church is going to have to become more authentic morally, for the greatness of the Gospel is now seen to have become quite trivial and inconsequential in its life. If the Gospel means so little to the Church, if it changes so little, why then should unbelievers believe it?" (Losing Our Virtue,).

Wells and others have written extensively on these themes and their observations and exhortations are compelling. However, here I will quote from an email my colleague Carrie Russell (herself a "millennial") sent me recently:

As a whole we've stopped preaching the Gospel, sin and death, redemption and the pursuit of holiness. We just water it down

more and more till it becomes practically irrelevant ... We've cheapened grace, by refusing to pursue holiness, a natural result of fearing the controlling legalism monster. The same kind of preaching that brought about the great awakenings of the past is needed today: the truth of sin, death, and redemption. We're losing kids in good part because we've hidden from them the truth they really need.

Amen. Neither Packer nor Piper could say it better. Marc Yoder concludes:

... most of our churches are sending youth into the world embarrassingly ignorant of our faith. How could we not? We've jettisoned catechesis, sold them on "deeds not creeds" and encouraged them to start the quest to find "God's plan for their life". Yes, I know your church has a "What we believe" page, but is that actually being taught and reinforced from the pulpit? I've met evangelical church leaders ("Pastors") who didn't know the difference between justification and sanctification. I've met megachurch board members who didn't understand the atonement. When we chose leaders based upon their ability to draw and lead rather than to accurately teach the faith? Well, we don't teach the faith.

3. Evangelicalism has failed to articulate and advance the biblical view of human sexuality.

Too often, we have proclaimed only what we are against and failed to explain the goodness of sexual expression (and sexual chastity) as designed by God. Instead, too much of the time Evangelicals (a) seem embarrassed by the Bible's definitive teaching about human sexuality; (b) are ignorant of why the Bible teaches what it does on sexuality and sexual intimacy (this involves serious thinking and intellectual wrestling, something younger Evangelicals often are better at than their teachers); (c) are afraid that people will be put-off by gracious but uncompromisingly truthful teaching

concerning Christian faith and sex; and (d) evade what have become culturally hard truths because we are afraid of being accused of being bigots, haters, homophobes, clueless, etc.

In a recent letter to columnist Rod Dreher, a self-identified “ex-Evangelical,” a young man writes that he was never taught the theological bases of his tradition’s opposition to homosexuality. As he puts it,

In all the years I was a member, my evangelical church made exactly one argument about SSM. It’s the argument I like to call the Argument from Ickiness: Being gay is icky, and the people who are gay are the worst kind of sinner you can be. Period, done, amen, pass the casserole.

When you have membership with no theological or doctrinal depth that you have neglected to equip with the tools to wrestle with hard issues, the moment ickiness no longer rings true with young believers, their faith is destroyed. This is why other young ex-evangelicals I know point as their “turning point” on gay marriage to the moment they first really got to know someone who was gay.

How eloquent, how correct, and how sad.

It’s hard to talk about the Bible’s vision of human sexuality, because it involves challenging the assumptions of the post-modern many and affirming the exclusivity of intimacy reserved for one man-one woman marriage. To many ears these assertions sound immediately anachronistic, and many of those who make (or should be making) the case for them are themselves too untaught or un-thoughtful to articulate them well.

We must recover the clear vision articulated by Andreas Köstenberger, editor of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* and professor of New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Seminary:

... the Bible makes clear that, at the root, marriage and the family are not human conventions based merely on a temporary consensus and time-honored tradition. Instead, Scripture teaches that family was God's idea and that marriage is a divine, not merely human, institution. The implication of this truth is significant indeed, for this means that humans are not free to renegotiate or redefine marriage and the family in any way they choose but that they are called to preserve and respect what has been divinely instituted. This is in keeping with Jesus' words, uttered when his contemporaries asked him about the permissibility of divorce: "What therefore God has joined together let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6)."

4. The subjective and highly personal nature of some Evangelical churches fails to satisfy the deep longings of many young men and women.

In many youth-focused churches, Jesus is portrayed as more like a sympathetic friend than a holy and transforming Redeemer. This is understandable, given how many young people come from broken homes and need a foundation of reassurance, security, and love before their walks with God can deepen. Yet as understandable as it might be, such a presentation of Jesus, at least if sustained, is too one-dimensional to meet the needs of the spiritually emaciated and intellectually curious. An active mind and a healing heart want more than repetitive, doleful, and emotionally cathartic "praise songs."

Adding to this problem is the tyranny of urgent need: If a parishioner has a son is addicted to drugs, what she needs immediate help, sound counsel from the Word of God and the application of biblical truth to her situation. A harried pastor might find little time for deep study and reflection in an era of moral collapse.

Yet this underscores both the need for strong seminary training and also reasonable boundaries that will constrain

the onslaught of the “right now” to enable pastors and other Christian leaders to have the time they need to study, ponder, and pray about deep issues. Additionally, many pastors and Christian teachers have been too schooled in Rogerian counseling to be able to bring a healing, if sometimes hard, word from God to such situations, and, these leaders often lack grounding in biblical moral philosophy and Scriptural teachings about such issues as substance abuse and human sexuality.

To paraphrase Lincoln, the assumptions of the quiet past (e.g., most kids growing up with a mom and a dad; sex outside of marriage viewed as always wrong, etc.) are insufficient for the stormy present.

Additionally, our “fun” activities can become an idol and, to maturing younger believers a hindrance. Pizza parties for our youth are fun and healthy, but must be seen not as ends in themselves but as a means to draw students into grace-and-truth filled discussions about what they believe, what the Bible says, and why. As Marc Yoder writes, “If church is simply a place to learn life-application principles to achieve a better life in community you don’t need a crucified Jesus for that.”

5. Public education and popular culture encourage relativism and sentimentality as the highest goods; truth is seen as non-existent or at least unknowable. “Our national character stinks to high heaven,” wrote Walker Percy in *The Moviegoer*, “but we are kinder than ever.” We have substituted emotion for truth, affirmation for integrity, niceness for virtue, and consensual opinion for rationality.

“Moral relativism has had a pervasive influence in our culture, especially on the American educational system,” write Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl. “In fact, relativism has been officially incorporated in the education curriculum, known as values clarification” (*Relativism: Feet Planted*

Firmly in Mid-Air, , 75).

Our schools and our media discourage belief in truth as permanent and discernible, in consequence of which calling something morally “wrong” is seen as offensive, even obstreperous. We rationalize our incapacity to call certain things good and others evil, and we breed the “men without chests” warned of by C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*. University of Virginia professor Vigen Guroian writes,

... we fall back on the excuse that we are respecting our children's freedom by permitting them to determine right from wrong and to choose for themselves clear goals of moral living. But this is the paean of a false freedom that pays misdirected tribute to a deeply flawed notion of individual autonomy ... Our society is embracing an anti-human trinity of pragmatism, subjectivism, and cultural relativism that denies the existence of a moral sense or a moral law. (Tending the Heart of Virtue, p.4)

6. Our youth have been raised in an era in which personal autonomy is seen as the greatest good and in which revealed truth is seen as malleable. As a result, many don't want to follow biblical moral teachings on sexual and recreational activities.

When younger Evangelicals are told that such things as pre-marital sex and recreational use of mild hallucinogenic drugs are wrong, many bridle: It sound pretentious to say something is wrong and unfairly limiting to their efforts toward self-discovery (translation: I really want to sleep with my boy-/girl-friend; who are you to tell me not to?). Here's one example:

Brittany, a 24-year-old veterinary technician, is an example of the newly disaffected (Evangelical youth). In high school, she attended a conservative Episcopal church in northern

Virginia. She enrolled in college thinking of herself as a conservative and not wanting to have sex until she was married. Her views changed when she met her boyfriend. She began to question the theology of her home church on a number of social issues.

This young woman's theological views of human sexual morality changed when she wanted to sleep with her boyfriend; perhaps exacerbated by peer pressure and loneliness, her theological transformation was grounded less in conviction than rationalization. Note, too, that she began questioning biblical teaching not just on this but on "a number of social issues." Autonomous desire spars with unbending and limiting truth: which one wins in a culture of self-exaltation?

The Barna Group* augments the portrait through compelling statistical data:

With unfettered access to digital pornography and immersed in a culture that values hyper-sexuality over wholeness, teen and twenty-something Christians are struggling with how to live meaningful lives in terms of sex and sexuality. One of the significant tensions for many young believers is how to live up to the church's expectations of chastity and sexual purity in this culture, especially as the age of first marriage is now commonly delayed to the late twenties. Research indicates that most young Christians are as sexually active as their non-Christian peers, even though they are more conservative in their attitudes about sexuality. One-sixth of young Christians (17%) said they "have made mistakes and feel judged in church because of them."

7. Similarly, personal relationships are difficult to trump: Friendships with people who live "according to the flesh" are hard to integrate with a firm stance for truth.

Co-workers, friends, and family members who cohabit, are

openly homosexual, and avow atheism or agnosticism are real people with the same hopes and enjoyments and struggles as any sexually pure young Evangelical. Upon getting to know them, a lot of younger believers are a bit shaken – how can I oppose someone I have come to love? How can I say “no” to a person who earnestly believes what he does is morally right?

This is where, as noted above, the necessity of the foundation of truth becomes indispensable. Truth teaches that is ungracious to be personally insulting, but unloving to affirm a behavior or a habit that is wrong and destructive. Unemboldened by such conviction and themselves often deeply wounded, many young people find it much more appealing (and often easier) simply to affirm that which does not immediately harm them or self-apparently harm those engaged in it.

Truth divides. This is discomfiting, but unavoidable. If a friend you love rejects you because you take a moral stand contrary to her beliefs or behavior, that hurts. No one ever wants to damage or lose a cherished relationship.

But Jesus, the most gracious Man and truest Friend Who ever lived, was rejected and crucified. We are called to be like Him, even at the cost of relationships.

This never justifies crude, abusive, or boorish behavior, but we are left without excuse regarding our obligation to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) to those we care about deeply, even if doing jeopardizes their friendship.

8. Finally, broken marriages that fail to model Christ to their children.

While data are mixed on the percentage of divorce within professing Evangelical families are mixed, it is beyond dispute that millions of young people raised as Evangelicals have also been raised in homes without one of their biological or adoptive parents.

My colleagues Pat Fagan and Henry Potrykus have documented the effects of divorce on the economy, but as Fagan notes separately, the human toll is exhaustive and tragic:

(Divorce) frequently leads to the development of destructive conflict management methods, diminished social competence, the early loss of virginity, diminished sense of masculinity or femininity, more trouble with dating, more cohabitation, greater likelihood of divorce, higher expectations of divorce later in life, and a decreased desire to have children ... (Divorce) diminishes the frequency of worship of God and recourse to Him in prayer; diminishes children's learning capacity and educational attainment; reduces household income and deeply cuts individual earning capacity; significantly increases crime, abuse and neglect, drug use, and the costs of compensating government services; weakens children's health and longevity; and increases behavioral, emotional, and psychiatric risks, including even suicide.

It is not difficult to imagine how such wounds are deepened when a child is told that there is a God Who loves him and cares tenderly for him and then witnesses his parents rejecting each other. Little wonder that jaded young people looking for love and acceptance will seek them in such troubling places as the back seat of a car or a deserted classroom.

In summary, many younger Evangelicals who leave “the faith once delivered” do so for reasons well beyond the “pernicious sexism, religious intolerance, and conservative politics” noted earlier.

As Evangelical leaders pray about and discuss ways of winning younger men and women to Christ and also ways of keeping many who have come to know Him in fellowship with Him and His church. Our ministries are diluted and rendered, ultimately, powerless, when we fail to proclaim the whole counsel of God,

when we cater to listeners' feelings more than their needs, and when self-loathing becomes more prevalent than holy confidence.

A "famished and fainting race," in Carl Henry's memorable and compassionate phrase, deserves more, as does the Lord Who calls us to draw men and women to Himself.

** The author appreciates the many contributions of George Barna and his research team over the years, but encourages discernment when it comes to accepting all the conclusions they propound.*

Rob Schwarzwald *er* is Senior Vice President at Family Research Council. This article appeared on *Canon and Culture*, April 17, 2014.