

When A Believer Leaves A Church

Thank you, Troy, for the following:



I'm encountering more and more pastors in institutional churches that are obviously perplexed with the continuing decline in church attendance in spite of all their best efforts. Most of their responses betray a fortress mentality and all too often assume something is wrong with the people rather than with church as we've traditionally known it. Below is my response to them....

Pastor,

Some leave 'church' because they don't want Jesus and some leave because they can't find Jesus. But the most surprising trend is that a growing number of long time believers are quite simply following Jesus out. It is a worldwide phenomenon that has been characterized as a "Divine Disillusionment".

Here is a quote from Barna's review of church trends from 1991 to 2011.

"The most carefully watched church-related statistic is adult attendance. Since 1991, attendance has receded by nine percentage points, dropping from 49% in 1991 to 40% in 2011." – Barna (see link below)

This 'leaving' is happening everywhere. A choreographed world event is taking place. For decades church attendance has been in steady decline and has been the topic of much discussion. In 2005, George Barna, the most quoted Christian statistician, went in search of this group of 'leaving believers' to discover who and what they were about. In his book 'Revolution' he describes them as, "the most passionate group of Christians he had ever encountered." Below is an excerpt from his book on this group he calls 'Revolutionaries'.

"These are people who are less interested in attending church than in being the church," he explained. "We found that there is a significant distinction in the minds of many people between the local church – with a small 'c' – and the universal Church – with a capital 'C'. Revolutionaries tend to be more focused on being the Church, capital C, whether they participate in a congregational church or not."

"A common misconception about revolutionaries," he continued, "is that they are disengaging from God when they leave a local church. We found that while some people leave the local church and fall away from God altogether, there is a much larger segment of Americans who

are currently leaving churches precisely because they want more of God in their life but cannot get what they need from a local church. They have decided to get serious about their faith by piecing together a more robust faith experience. Instead of going to church, they have chosen to be the Church, in a way that harkens back to the Church detailed in the Book of Acts.” – Barna (see link below)

On the one hand I sympathize with those in the institutional churches who are frightened or confused by what God is doing, but on the other hand it is really exciting to be a part of this growing organic body of believers that no man can make boast of. Jesus said, “I will build my Church”. Not some man, not some denomination. Christ will build His Church. God clearly called my Family and I out of ‘church’ as the world has commonly known it, but we have not left the Body of Christ, rather, we feel like we have finally joined it. We still pray, worship, study the word, and give financially as God leads; but now we do it in our home and in the homes of other believers we network with.

Our leaving was not a flippant decision. It was not a case of woundedness or lousy leadership. Quite the opposite. Our family could have been a Poster Advertisement about the good of the institutional church. We had been active members for over 20 years in two successful churches. We attended 3 services a week and gave 10%. We had assumed leadership, received recognition, and had a wide circle of peers and friends that looked up to us. It was a place where we had received much good and had given much good in return. However, beginning in 2006 God gave us this “Divine Disillusionment”. A growing and nagging realization that church as we know it is not Church as God wants it. I started to ask God hard questions and He started giving me hard answers. Then He told us to leave. At first we refused, but everything we did in our old ‘church’ was stricken with spiritual deadness. For us, God had moved on. We had to choose between staying with the familiar, with friends, and the praise of men; or leaving everything to follow Christ out into the unknown. One day as I contemplated in church why I couldn’t feel His presence anymore He burst in and said, “You know where to find me.” We had no choice. We left everything we ever knew about ‘church’ to follow our Savior.

So what have I discovered after being out 4 years? I’ve discovered that the “Church” is not a building, an order of worship, or a denomination. That Church is not ‘where’ you go but ‘who’ you are, a people whose King is Jesus. A people that can not be contained in a box or channeled down prescribed courses laid out by men. A people where Christ is the Head and the entire Body of Believers is a ‘Priesthood’. A Priesthood that values caring for one another over caring for buildings, programs or professional staff. A Priesthood to a lost and dying world that doesn’t want our churches but a Savior, doesn’t want our institutions but the Kingdom of Heaven. A Priesthood that can serve, gather, worship, pray and share Christ anywhere, anytime. Particularly in our homes.

I've discovered that the Body of Christ is much bigger than the institutional definition of 'church' as we've come to know it. That God is breaking out of the box we've placed Him in and He's doing it without our permission. It is time we recognized that He is a King with full access to every subject in His Kingdom. That it's His Church and that He will build it as He pleases. That we should not interfere in the work He has OTHERS doing just because it doesn't look like the work He has US doing. That we must embrace the freedom to let all men hear and act as God leads them. To welcome them when God brings them into our circle and to encourage them when God sends them out and to not fret if God tells others to join them in a new work. I've discovered that believers should not be treated like a commodity, or property or handled like a business. That we must stop trying to fit God's will for others into well traveled courses based on 'OUR' definition of what God's Will should be.

In the future I hope you will come to understand this move of the Spirit and discover what your role is. But please, don't denigrate those who are leaving. Let them depart in peace, encourage them to be true to God's voice and welcome them as brothers should they return. God is at work.

I believe the trend toward House Churches all over the world is only a part of the Revolution God is putting in place. I see positive changes in various ministries. One thing is for sure. God is returning for a White and Spotless Church. Which can only mean that change must happen.

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Links to quotes

[Barna Examines Trends in 14 Religious Factors over 20 Years](#)

[A Faith Revolution Is Redefining "Church"](#)