

MODERATOR: The following extracts are from a couple of very interesting articles published by the Bible College of New Zealand. The journalist who wrote them was very surprised at his findings. Why had people stopped attending church and how was their faith now? Please go to the websites at the end to read the full articles.

A Churchless Faith

By Alan Jamieson

What makes people stop attending church and what happens to their faith after they have left?

As I approached the front door of the first of over a hundred church leavers I would interview, I thought I knew what happened to the Christian faith of those who no longer went to church. I could easily understand why people choose to leave the church, I'd watched others leaving; and had contemplated shifting out myself on more than one occasion. Part of what held me in was the belief that leaving the church was inevitably the first step to a dwindling faith – the ultimate Christian disgrace - 'backsliding'.

Two and a half hours later I left by the same front door somewhat bewildered. The couple I had just met didn't fit my expectations. They had left their eldership role in a growing Pentecostal church nearly five years previously, yet their faith had obviously continued to develop, their understanding of God at work in their lives was undoubtedly continuing, and they were involved in their community as an outworking of their faith. I was intrigued and somewhat mystified. My plans to conduct a quick study of half a dozen or so church leavers, which would confirm my prejudices, were in disarray. In fact the study grew into a four year project involving 162 interviews with both church leavers and leaders in Evangelical Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (a group which I refer to as EPC churches).

The people I tracked were predominately in their 30s and 40s. They had made Christian commitments (as well as commitments to their respective churches) as adults (over the age of 18 years) and had been actively involved in their churches for an average of 15.8 years.

Why I Left A Church...

Male, 37 yrs

"I haven't been to church for more than six months. Some people say that you cannot be a Christian in isolation – you need a Christian community. I couldn't agree more.

The reason why I left church is not because I wanted to separate myself from a community of believers, but because the church I was going to wasn't functioning as such a community. A Christian community is exactly what I am after – but is not what I have found in church.

I have attended Pentecostal church services for many years and have never liked the worship – since to me worship isn't singing songs and singing songs isn't worshipping. The preaching, usually, is banal at best. I find that a very occasional communion service with watered-down raspberry juice is a fairly lame imitation of what should be a profound celebration of a Christian mystery. And I am something of an introvert, so I don't like hanging around afterwards for fellowship.

I find Pentecostal church services rather content-less. The theological merit of most songs is dubious, and much of the preaching (in my church at least) is anecdotal and only scratches the surface of Scripture and tradition.

I am after a community which can take the good things in the Pentecostal experience (mainly its insistence that every believer can and should have a direct encounter with God through his Holy Spirit, and that all believers are empowered for service) while exploring other Christian traditions and expressions – such as liturgical prayer, silence and meditation. I hope for a group that can discuss faith with theological depth and insight – where the teaching mines the depths of the Scriptures for their treasure.

I left church not because I do not believe in church, but because what passes for church falls so far short of what is possible, and what I hope for, that to go on a Sunday morning is simply depressing. After I read Dave Tomlinson's book *The Post-Evangelical* I recognised that there are many others, like me, who give up church-going because it seems the church is going nowhere."

Female, 43 years:

"Weddings, funerals, and maybe an occasional Easter or Christmas service sums up my appearances in church these days. I have attended church for most of my life. At 15 years of age I became a 'born again Christian' finding a living relationship with Jesus Christ. For the most part I attended charismatic style churches and was privileged to receive some excellent teaching from scripture and befriend many good people.

Not the sort to look for trouble or to step out of the mould for the sake of it, it was strange to find myself growing uncomfortable with the way I perceived church. As a leader of a women's group I met once a month with the church hierarchy. It was at these meetings that I became aware of the politics and orchestration of situations within the church.

It was often apparent that sermons were designed to motivate people for a coming event or to help bring in the money for the building fund. Much time, energy and money was spent in the building up of church plant. It often seemed that projects were the goal, rather than a desire to be led by the Holy Spirit and used by him.

I also felt a growing discomfort about the performance nature of the Sunday services. In Sunday morning services those musicians and worship leaders deemed to be 'good enough' performed at the front. In the family service the Childrens' Church leaders organised a presentation where each set of leaders tried to outdo the previous ones.

Over months of pondering these things, I decided that church walls tend to protect Christians from the world and get in the way of their interaction with ordinary people.

Churches are full of people who sit and watch the front. Faith is not given much opportunity to grow and for many, there is little opportunity to use the talents God has given them. There is too much hierarchy, too much assessing the spirituality of others and too much controlling on behalf of God.

Our family stopped attending the 'church in walls'. We would come home from church frustrated and cross and found it was better not to go at all. It was a lonely venture. Mostly people didn't understand. Those we had considered our friends no longer contacted us and we accepted that we were now not part of the 'club'. Ultimately it doesn't matter that people didn't understand, or that now we were in a 'box' labelled 'backslider'. What matters is that we stay in communication with God – listen to his voice, walk with him and obey him.”

Female, 70 years:

“The institutional church is so frustrating. It's simply driving me crazy and making me very angry. I want to sit down and weep.”

You may find more on this topic:

Ten Myths About Church Leavers

<http://www.reality.org.nz/articles/32/32-jamieson.html>

A Churchless Faith

<http://www.reality.org.nz/articles/33/33-jamieson.html>

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