

Losing My Religion



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by Chap Clark

“We love our church. We’ve made great friends there, and it used to give us that boost every week. But lately it’s become less a part of our lives. Our friends left a long time ago! The songs and sermons are fine, but it all feels so, well, stale. I’m not sure what happened, but church just doesn’t seem to matter as much as it used to.”

A 48-year-old lifelong Christian father

Long before the pandemic, and even before the social and cultural explosions of 2020 were observably simmering, most honest churches started to take notice that somehow we find ourselves in the midst of a spiritual sea change. People of all ages have been slipping out of the pews. As youth ministry leaders continue to ring the bell for the increase of disconnected and disaffected young people walking away from institutional expressions of church, the oft ignored, but hardly secret, reality is we are not just “losing kids,” but in every demographic, people are seeming to disappear. And this was happening even before March 2020, when COVID took us all down.

What will happen now as we slowly eek our way back into the “normal” routine of people’s lives? Will people seek out authentic expressions of faith? Will they want what they had, or at least thought they had? These are the questions that worship leaders, pastors, and church leaders are asking, and have been fearing, for months. Will they “come back?”

There is a still deeper question at play here, and it is harder to pin down. What has contributed to so many wanderings away from church? That leads to, of course, how has the “online church” affected a desire for an organized faith and loyalty to a given church

community? Of course, many will and have come enthusiastically back, ready to connect and worship and serve. But what about everybody else? My middle-aged friend, consistently invested for years, seems to reflect a “been there, done that” response that is not uncommon. While there is evidence that many seem to be more “religious” than ever, it is as if somehow many have decided that what the church says and does simply no longer connects like it once did.

Why do so many wander?

“They preach about community, we sing that we’re all in this together, but these are just words that don’t line up with my life. I have been looking for real friendship, and during Covid I realized that what we had was not what I needed. I’m rethinking everything. I’m not done with Jesus, but I think I’m done with my church.”

A 38-year-old teacher now looking for the “right” church

It would be easy to write off such a sentiment as unsatisfied church hopping—looking for a deeper sense of connection, but it still coming down to liking one style of worship or preaching over another. Even in that case, it may not be that faith itself is necessarily lost, but that it is rather a quest for something more, or deeper.

When it comes to faith, everyone has their own unique story to tell. Some may tell someone what they are going through; others may not even know themselves. There are lots of studies about why people leave the church, and the reasons tend to fall into one of four general categories:

Disillusionment with people and/or with God.

Hurt by someone associated with faith, or perception of what faith should be.

Frustration with church leaders (or “Christians” in general).

Lifestyle change leading to a lack of interest (e.g. going to college, new hobby).

Among these, it is noteworthy that none specifically has to do with faith per se. Each reason, in its own way, is more about people than it is about faith. Certainly, there are those on a journey where tenets or expectations of faith prompt them to move in a different direction. But for many people who leave their faith home, the reasons have more to do with others—what they wanted, needed, experienced, or received from others—than it has to do with theology or beliefs.¹

What can we do?

What is our response to those we know are slipping away from our community and church family? Is it to try to convince them to come back? To let them know that they are loved and valued, in the hopes that they will come around?

As a pastoral team, we have thought and prayed long and hard on behalf of people who were once involved and active in their faith and church life and have backed away, for whatever reason. One knee-jerk reaction has been to want to chase after them, to convince them that God loves them and so do we. Our next response has been to look in the mirror and ask what it is that we could do better or differently: be more direct with social issues (or, in some cases, less direct with social issues!); give greater attention to worship creativity, new playlists, even more hymns; or work harder at more “contextual” or narrative/story-oriented sermons. Without question, when it comes to what we do as a fellowship, we in leadership must always engage in this kind of self-reflective work.

But, at the end of the day, the reasons why most people actually leave have little to do with what we do, even if that’s what they say or blast on Facebook or Instagram. Somehow, they have lost confidence in who we are, especially when it comes to giving us access to their souls. Especially in the fragmented and isolated world we have been living in, people are looking for a safe place to be loyal to those who love them and with whom they trust enough to deeply engage. To be involved in a church fellowship is, after all, a major time, social, financial, and heart commitment. The larger the church—the broader the programmatic menu—the easier it is to bounce from one mini-community to another or just hide in the shadows. But to really be invested—to be known and know, loved and love—takes an even more costly commitment and risk.

The Call of God’s Church

Jesus heard this. He said to him, ‘**You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**’ – **Luke 18:22**. Before he said this, Jesus “loved” this wealthy young man (**Mark 10:21**), out of compassion for the sincerity of the man’s quest. This man had been taught his whole life that faith was about receiving a reward, so he naturally wanted to do something to make sure. As it turned out, he could not see that the “treasure” he longed for was right before him. He allowed himself to be so handcuffed by his wealth, and likely everything that his life had been built upon, that he could not see that the answer to his question was the One he asked. “Follow me” was the defining call.

Of course, in context Jesus was not speaking only about money, but also about the choice we must all make when it comes to biblical faith. A lifelong Christian, an elder yet, told me last week, “These last few years I’ve begun to understand that I have to be all in.” That is the consistent call of Jesus and His kingdom. “I am what I love,” writes James K. A. Smith, and he goes on to ask, “What does this have to do with church?” His answer? “You worship what you love.” ²

Our role in helping others find their way to a new or renewed faith is to offer the invitation of Jesus to “**follow Him.**” We have one message, and it is not “Come to church!” As Paul told the Colossian church, “**He is the one we proclaim**” (**Col 1:28**). For anyone who may have wandered away from faith, for whatever reason, here are three specific ways we can invite them into the “**treasure**” of knowing and experiencing Christ.

1. Make it about Jesus.

We focus on the church, the worship, the programs, or even the preaching to draw someone back to God’s household, when the only draw that will transform and ultimately satisfy is the presence of Christ’s Spirit. What we should do is point to Jesus—His sacrifice, work, and mission. We don’t diminish or ignore that faith is indeed risky, yet the gift is the treasure we ultimately seek. When Jesus is lifted up, and the call to follow Him is clear and central, He will speak (**John 12:32**).

2. Make it about the environment over the production.

What stirs us to faith? Of course, we are sometimes emotionally drawn in by music and prayers and words. But what encourages and reinforces a faith that is laser-focused on Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God (**Acts 1:3; 28:30-31**)? The warmth and safety of a group of people who have asked and answered the question, “Whom do I love?” To sing together songs that remind us of our redemption. To sigh and listen to one another as we settle into the arms of our Savior in prayer. To receive God’s Word as a family who has abandoned all to hear and respond in trust. This is who we are. This is Whom we proclaim.

3. Participate together in God’s kingdom reign.

As we pray, “**Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven**” (**Matthew 6:10**), we affirm together that our vocation, individually and collectively, is to walk alongside of Him as the kingdom is brought to all of creation. From the ember sparked through gathering in Christ’s name and Spirit-led community, a flame is waiting to be set free. In too many churches, faith has become a spectator sport of enjoying, experiencing, comparing, evaluating, and critiquing. What we do as followers of Christ is put our hearts

and minds right so that the Spirit may ignite and release each believer in the joy of walking with and serving Jesus Christ on behalf of the kingdom.

The lost, the wanderer, the confused, the ignored—each one, regardless of circumstances or hope—are invited to find their life in the risk of knowing, loving, and following Jesus Christ. The great joy of walking, and leading, God's people in and through the gathering of fellow followers is that we have this treasure in "jars of clay," and we all are witnesses to the reason and source of our hope. May we be the kind of authentic, single-minded, abandoned children who trust Jesus enough to invite all comers to join us.