March 6, 2015

WHY YOU REALLY LEFT THE CHURCH

Most of my best friends from boarding school in Singapore left the Adventist Church. As have most of my friends from primary school in Australia, my friends in Michigan and a bunch of my friends from college in England. And it isn’t just my friends. My generation—Generation X—left the Church in droves. We were, it turns out, a little foretaste of what was to come.

Today, Christian literature is littered with articles about Millennials abandoning church, with various hobbyhorses being flogged to explain the exodus. So let’s look at a few of them.

There’s the old chestnut—“someone said something wrong”. Now let’s get real here. No-one could hold down a job, stay in school or have a relationship if they were so sensitive they left as soon as they bumped into a grump. Yes, of course people at church should be kind, pure and true. And, in my experience, Adventists generally are—though not always and not everyone. But, outside of extreme circumstances, people don’t walk out on things they value simply because they come in contact with real human beings—warts and all. They walk out because they don’t value the underlying substance.

A second explanation—popularised by American author and columnist Rachel Held Evans—is that Millennials are abandoning church because it focuses on sexual morality, rather than social justice. But this doesn’t work on two counts.
First, the denominations that are biggest on talking social justice and the smallest on biblical sexual morality, are the ones shrinking the fastest.

Second, it turns out all those traditional evangelicals are hardly indifferent to poverty. World Vision, one of the largest aid and development outfits in the world, is an evangelical initiative. The Salvation Army? They’re evangelicals too. And you would be hard pressed to find a community that does more, pound for pound, to provide health and education to the poor around the globe than the Adventist Church.

So if it isn’t grumpy people, unfashionable views on sex or cold indifference to the poor, it must be stodgy worship services! Apparently not. There’s no community that has embraced contemporary worship more enthusiastically than American evangelicals, and yet they are losing Millennials left, right and centre. Pastors in black t-shirts, churches with espresso machines and Daft Punk style praise bands just aren’t packing ‘em in like they used to.

Which leaves the superficially profound answer: organised church is antithetical to the authentic Christ. The problem? It was Jesus who set up the church, and He began it with 12 very imperfect people. So if the real Jesus set up a church full of real people, how could disassociating from a real church be consistent with loving the real Christ?

But there’s an even more fundamental problem: all these explanations rest on age-old phenomena. There is, for example, nothing new about Christian teachings on sex or flaws in organised churches. If the rate of defections has increased, the underlying reason for the drift away must also be increasing. New events require new explanations.

So what’s new? One of the most profound changes in our culture is the explosion of media consumption. Back in the early ‘90s, the average Australian, for example, watched about 17 hours of TV per week. According to McCrindle Research, Australians today spend close to four hours online every day, and about three hours a day watching TV, for a staggering 49 hours of media consumption per week.

As mass media has become more heavily entwined with our lives, the content has simultaneously become increasingly incompatible with, and even hostile to, Christianity. Our media consumption profoundly impacts the way we see the world. Ellen White comments on a popular truism this way: “It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence.”
Could the answer to the spiritual malaise infecting society have little to do with the inadequacies of everyone and everything else, and all to do with how we choose to invest our consciousness? Is the exodus from church the inevitable, natural result of our media consumption patterns? Could the solution be as simple as spending less time watching Game of Thrones and more time focused on the Throne of Grace?