

Sticking at it.

Why Young Adults Leave the Church.

+ self reflection questions.

by Mark Sayers



1# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Choice Anxiety.

Well here we go, in no particular order, reason number one why Young Adults are leaving the church. Ladies and Gents introducing...(drum roll please)... Choice Anxiety. If you live in the West you are rich, not just financially, but you enjoy an affluence of options and choices.

On one hand this is fantastic, we have access to millions of opportunities and experiences that our forebears could never dream of. But the flipside of this abundance of choice means that we become paralysed in the face of a million possibilities, choices and variables. Barry Schwartz in his book *The Paradox of Choice* notes that the more choices we are given, the more our well-being and happiness deteriorates. Why? Because whatever choice we make we are always comparing our decisions to the myriad of other possible choices. Thus we can never be at peace with the paths that we take, we are always comparing and fretting, we are stuck with a constant gut level anxiety or angst over our choices. Add to this the fact that daily we are confronted with thousands of advertising messages all of which are designed by experts and marketing psychologists, and each has the purpose to make us feel discontent with our lives in order to make new purchases, and you can see why we are stuck in choice anxiety.

Churches are now seeing a similar marketing driven form of choice anxiety. As churches struggle to make inroads missionally in Western cultures, churches are becoming more and more sophisticated and competitive in their marketing to believers, thus many churches contribute to Christians feeling less satisfied where they are. I remember catching up with a Young Adult pastor of a large and successful young adults ministry. He was absolutely beside himself with worry over a rumour that well known church was going to plant in his suburb. He told me that he estimated that if this happened he could lose hundreds of his young adults.

1# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Choice Anxiety.

How does this play out in the faith lives of young adults? Christian young adults are stuck with a constant splinter in the mind, the never ending nagging feeling that they might have made the wrong decision. Maybe they have chosen the wrong church to attend? Should they be at the hip contemporary mega-church down the road? Or maybe they should try the small emerging church in the next suburb? Or should they rejoin their friends and family at the traditional church that they grew up in? Did they even make right choice in following Christ? Maybe they should move Cities, States, Countries? Should they change partners, careers, lifestyles, ethics?

All of these factors create a constant and nagging feeling that young adults must leave their churches in order to find fulfilment. However as soon as you move and set your tent down, that nagging feeling returns. Sadly more and more young adult believers are experiencing a harried, exhausting and restless spiritual homelessness.

1# Self Reflection

Choice Anxiety

Questions

How am I personally affected by *Choice Anxiety* on a scale of one to ten?

How does *Choice Anxiety* influence my happiness and well-being?

In what detailed ways does *Choice Anxiety* manifest itself in my life?

How does *Choice Anxiety* influence how I view discipleship and Christian community?

2# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Post-Christian Identity

If you are a young adult believer living out your faith at the beginning of the 21st century, you find yourself in a unique social position. You are living within a culture which has known, and now discarded Christianity as at best an irrelevance or at worst a mistake. This is a relatively new situation when we compared with the people of God in other times and places in history.

Biblical faith has almost always been about being in a minority. The Jews found themselves a small minority, often overrun by their militarily and culturally powerful neighbours. The early church also found themselves in a similar position; as they lived out their faith in the shadows of the Roman Empire. Being part of a marginal community is always difficult, it does not matter if that group is ethnic, cultural or religious. Holding a different worldview to those around you is tough, it raises all kinds of questions of identity and belonging in the mind of the member of the minority culture. All minority groups face the reality of assimilation and syncretism with the larger and more powerful cultures that they live in. As humans we love to fit in, we love to be on the larger, winning team.

However many minorities find themselves strengthened by their minority position. Often this is achieved by having a sense of mission, a cultural sense of purpose, in which the minority group defines itself by the 'justness' of its cause in contrast to the surrounding culture. However many young adult Christians are experiencing a kind of creeping doubt over the 'justness' of their faith; they hear the culture's critique of Christianity's contribution to the world and it starts to make sense to them.

The early church lived in a pre-Christian culture, other believers in the world today live in cultures that are Islamic, Animist, or Buddhist; however we live in a culture which is primarily Post-Christian.

2# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Post-Christian Identity

Western culture has bought the suit of Christianity, put it on, worn it around town for a bit, and now has returned it to the store, unhappy with its purchase, and is seeking a refund. Dan Brown swims in a sea of money because his book *The Da Vinci Code*, although historically ridiculous, connected deeply with the sense that many have today that the church in its union with worldly power has more damaged than blessed the world. Many intelligent and earnest people today in the secular West believe that the church is an agent of evil.

Many Christian young adults feel that they are living on the wrong side of Christian history. When they share their faith with their secular friends they are reminded of paedophile priests, fundamentalism and the Spanish inquisition. When they share their faith with their Muslim friends, inevitably the Crusades will enter the conversation. When they share their faith with their Jewish friends, old painful stories that have been past down for generations, memories of ghetto's, pogroms and 'Christian' Germany engineering the Holocaust, will be heard again.

Christianity is perceived in the popular imagination as being intellectually ludicrous, our behaviour and opinions are seen as bigoted. Whilst obviously I disagree with these assessments, they are a daily reality for many young adults trying to live out their faith in the secular world. I recently spoke with a young adult who works in a secular welfare job, she had only been in the job a few days and had not informed her co-workers that she was a Christian. Her colleagues were masters of politically correct language, who were at great pains to avoid using any language which could be seen as prejudiced. However when news came that a new position was going to be filled by a Christian, her colleagues could not contain their rancour, openly speaking of their disappointment and disgust that a Christian was going to be working

2# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Post-Christian Identity

with them.

This sort of cultural intolerance around faith creates a great tension in the believer. I am constantly approached by young adults who are trying to reconcile their faith with the disquiet that they feel over Christianity's disputed historical track record. While Christians and historians will debate this, it is still a daily issue for many young adults today who live, study, work and operate within secular culture. For many young adults who are trying to find a place in the world, to operate and 'fit in' within culture, the dislocation felt becomes too much, faith is left behind as identity and belonging is looked for outside of church walls.

2# Self Reflection

Post-Christian Identity

Questions

How do people outside of the Church react to you as Christian?

How does the low opinion that many have of Christians and the Church affect your sense of self?

How can you in your personal life and actions address some of the negative views that people have about Christians?

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3# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

The Pornification of Christian Resources

Recently an *Otaku* (Manga Fan) wrote a book which has sold like sushi in Japan. His book was addressed to the millions of young Japanese men who live their lives online and who immerse themselves in the fantasy worlds of Japanese animation. His thesis was that advances in technology now mean that young men do not need RL (real life) relationships with real world women. He argued that with the advent of 'mistress programs' (virtual girlfriend computer programs, kind of like Tamagotchi's but featuring attractive young women), no longer did men need to bother with ordinary women. He also argued that with the growth of the internet and with widespread availability of pornography, young men could enjoy a kind of virtual sexual relationship with the women of their dreams.

We see the same thing in the in the West, less people are getting married than ever before in history. With the casualization of sex, young men do not need to commit to long term relationships with women, because these days you can sleep with that girl who you just met at a party and still be home in time to join the FIFA 2008 tournament with the boys on the playstation.

A kind of similar phenomenon is occurring around church. I am constantly meeting young adults who are still passionate about their faith, but are no longer part of a faith community. When I ask them why, they tell me that there is no need. I ask them how they grow as Christians? They will tell me that they download podcasts from some of the worlds best preachers, they watch sermons on line from cutting edge churches, they read books from well known Christian writers, and attend all kinds of conferences and worship seminars. Some even regularly go on 'mission trips' to the third world. Many now choose to not go to their local church because every Sunday they can roll out of bed at midday and turn on Christian cable and watch services from the world's most successful churches.

3# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

The Pornification of Christian Resources

They read blogs and frequent Christian chat rooms to connect with other believers. Like the Japanese *Otaku* they feel that technology has superseded their need for real world - real time relationships. In many ways I feel sorry for local pastors who now have to 'compete' with the cream of the world's best speakers; that they have to explain to their young adults why their worship service cannot compete with the large convention that is run with a giant budget, and who feel that they have to apologise as to why faithful old Agnes on the organ is not up to the standard of the professional worship band on the album they just downloaded. I can't but help thinking that they must feel like a forty something mother of two who has to compete with their husbands obsession with a twenty year old Brazilian supermodel.

Now of course I think that it is great that all of this stuff is available, technology has brought all kinds of brilliant resources and influences into reach. Yet technology always cuts both ways. When technology replaces our need for real time community we suffer as humans. My friend and colleague Dave Fuller once said to me 'Church is important because it forces us to be in community with people who are not like us'. Philip Yancey once said that 'Marriage is not about finding happiness it is about character development'. I think it is the same with church.

Without community the mere consumption of Christian resources can be a kind of pornification. Pornography is a one way exchange, it is a consumptive sexual act that is divorced from relationship. Devoid of human connection, it turns both the viewed and the viewer into an object. In contrast relationality humanizes, it moves us towards what the great Jewish theologian Martin Buber called an I-Thou encounter. If I consume pornography it requires nothing of me, I remain static; however my relationship with my wife inspires me to be kind, caring and understanding; it prompts and provokes

3# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

The Pornification of Christian Resources

me towards growing as a human being. It is dynamic, it makes me want to be a better man. When we only consume Christian resources, it may challenge us, it may add to our knowledge, but nothing challenges us towards actual lifestyle change like Christian community. When you are in church and that guy with schizophrenia who yells in public wants to come out to Starbucks with you and your friends after the service, it is good for you! God is teaching you something that mere information cannot. When you sit and worship and nut out the gospel with people who were born in different cultures to you, who vote different to you, who you don't understand, who you would never normally make friends with; it grows you spiritually in ways that mere information gathering and teaching cannot.

So go nuts, download, read blogs and books, watch teaching DVD's, go to seminars, whatever; just remember however these things cannot give you the medicine for your soul that only covenantal Christian community can.

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3# Self Reflection

The Pornification of Christian Resources

Questions

What Christian resources do you access?

How do you feel about Christian community? What appeals to you about the idea, what repels you?

How could God be using Christian community to shape your character?

What can you learn in face to face real time community that you cannot in other less binding forms of community?

4# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Consumerist Spirituality

Today young adults worldview is deeply shaped by consumerism; it shapes how we purchase, how we relate, and how we shape our identities. In my research into why young adults leave church, I found consumerism to be one of the most dominant themes to emerge again and again. Many people had written excellent books on how Christians should be responding to the economic and justice issues raised by consumerism. But very few Christians seemed to be examining how consumerism was affecting out spirituality.

The worldview of consumerism deeply influences our spirituality. It creates an exchange were we expect instant returns for our investments. I constantly hear from young leaders who have left church after spending years volunteering their time. They tell me that they feel ripped off, that they have given and gotten nothing back, they view discipleship not as self-sacrificing service but rather a consumer exchange, in which instant gratification is sought. I kept finding young adults who when pressed were happy to follow Christ as long as he delivered a kind of consumerist heaven on earth. When this kind of heaven did not arrive, people became very disillusioned. Of course the advertising industry did not get the blame, God did, and active faith was ditched. In my book [The Trouble With Paris](#) I write,

“In a scene in Kevin Smith’s irreverent religious satire Dogma, the Roman Catholic Church decides that the crucifix is an irrelevant symbol for today. They believe that the image of a half-naked man dying on a cross is not an appealing brand logo. Instead, they come up with what they call “Buddy Jesus.” Buddy Jesus looks like a cross between a Sunday school picture book image of Jesus and an action hero. He is cartoonlike, winking and giving a thumbs-up sign. ... My friend Darryl Gardiner says this is Jesus as something like a “cool waiter” in some hip café. He doesn’t get too caught up in rules and simply wants

4# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Consumerist Spirituality

you to have a good time. Research done in both the United States and Australia is backing up this view, revealing that young adults view God something akin to a “cosmic butler” to be called on in times of strife or need, but who then quietly exits so as not to cramp our style. Such a Jesus ultimately becomes subservient to us and our agenda. We rob him of his divinity, instead placing it upon ourselves. Jesus thus becomes the herald of lifestyle improvement; we follow him because he might be able to deliver us the consumer dream.”

When we follow God because we are expecting a kind of consumer pay off; we have invested in a faith that cannot last, you can only church shop for so long. When we worship a God who we believe will make *our* dreams come true we are not following the God of the bible. Believers who live out their faith through the matrix of consumerism will end up almost definitely outside of the church and very disappointed.

4# Self Reflection

Consumerist Spirituality

Questions

In what ways has consumerism shaped your worldview?

In what ways has consumerism shaped your faith?

In what ways has consumerism shaped your view of Christian community?

In what ways has consumerism shaped your view of God's plan for your life?

5# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Commitmentphobia

Last time we spoke about the effect of the worldview of consumerism on the spiritual lives of Young Adults. One of the flow on effects of the worldview of consumerism is that it has a caustic, corrosive effect upon our ability to commit. I remember as a kid seeing a shirt that I wanted to buy, I had my money, and was ready to head to the cash register, when my mother taught me a key tactic known to every shopper, that is shopping around for a better bargain. We headed off to the others stores to see if the same shirt was on sale for a cheaper price. Hyper-Consumerism has taught us all to be good shoppers in almost every arena of life, we have learnt to not commit and hang on for the better bargain. For consumerism to operate effectively as a system, it needs a low commitment environment.

We only have to look at the arena of human sexuality to see how the world view of consumerism has shaped our behaviour. Consumerism shapes our civic life, and our community habits. In all areas we are taught to hold off, and not commit. In my book *The Trouble With Paris* I write,

“We run from those promises and covenants that humans have made to each other for thousands of years because they frighten us to death. Many today fear such commitment-based social institutions because self now takes precedence over commitment. As the worldview of hyperconsumerism has taken hold of our imaginations, everything has become shopping. We must not become entangled in commitments, because they could limit our options on finding something better. This constant search for something better means that the supershoppers of hyperconsumerism are still waiting for a better deal after the mall has closed and then are forced to return home empty-handed. Or we find ourselves always on the move, searching for a home that shifts and shimmies over the horizon. We keep up this restlessness as our fears of not being stimulated take over.”

5# Reasons Why Young Adults Leave Church

Commitmentphobia

The key to life, we are told, is to keep holding out for that perfect bargain. But the less we commit, the more we become passive. We never make a move; instead, we simply stand and watch life go by. Our fear of commitment has turned us into passive consumers.”

Of course this deeply effects how we view church. In my experience most young adults would view staying in a church for three years as a long term commitment. Most seem to re-examine their commitment to communities of faith on a rolling 12 month basis, this contractual view of church attendance is based on a fear of ‘missing out’ on something better. I would say that this level of commitment is pretty standard wherever I go. Needless to very few churches or denominations are taking this issue very seriously despite the obvious devastating effect on our churches both now and in the future.

5# Self Reflection

Commitmentphobia

Questions

How afraid of commitment are you? Rate your response on a scale of one to ten.

Someone once said *“Our ability to enjoy life is directly linked to our ability to commit.”* How do you feel about his statement?

How has the influence of *Commitmentphobia* affected how you approach relationships?

How has *Commitmentphobia* affected how you approach church?