



Why Are Young People Leaving Churches? (1998)

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Young people are leaving churches. This phenomenon has been spreading in Europe and America. Many Protestants are going to the Catholic Churches or the Orthodox Churches. Even though they are small in number, this phenomenon is happening even in the Evangelical Churches and in missionary organizations.

In Korea, this phenomenon is not prominent enough to be noticeable yet, but quite many young Korean Protestants are going to the Catholic, and there are some Christians who have stopped going to the churches or who became Buddhists.

The Union of Young Christians in Seoul shows that more than sixty percent of the young Christians are in the state of stagnation. If we do not do anything about this problem the number will decrease in the near future. And then why are young people leaving churches? I think, there are five main reasons for it.

Firstly, they are sick of the distorted spirituality.

The biggest crisis which the present churches are facing is weak and distorted spirituality. The spirituality which young people dislike is a very ugly kind of spirituality. The face-lifting spirituality of the older generation is one example of this. It is an ostensible display of spirituality which gives rise to the suspicion that what one sees is not the truth, or that peoples beliefs are not in accord with their morals. It means that people use their beliefs to show off or they use their good deeds as a way of saving their souls. (Matthew 5:13-48, 6: 1-21)

There are too many commandments and rules forced to people under the good name of training of true spirituality. Young people know the result of this distorted spirituality. It is the enervating spirituality and the absence of influence of Christians on society.

Another form of distorted spirituality is negative spirituality, which teaches that true spirituality is denying our humanity and living a "noble life" away from the secular world. That is the

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revival of the three problems of Colossians - pessimism, self-denying, and super-transcendental spiritual life. This doctrine is identical with the mottoes of the spiritualists - not to hold or not to taste nor to touch (Colossians 2:16-20).

This attitude causes people to despise everyday life and devalue the secular world and it also furthers the illusion that pursuing religion in proud loneliness is the best form of spirituality. This negative spirituality leads the young away from the vital task of fighting the battles that they need to fight in the areas of their work and daily life because they think of religion as something that doesn't have anything to do with those things. This kind of spirituality appears to be very wise and spiritual, but in fact this is not powerful at all in fighting against sins.

Another problem is anti-intellectual spirituality. Nowadays regardless whether they are in the East or the West, churches are addicted to anti-intellectualism. They teach that personal experiences are more important than the facts themselves. They believe that intelligence is an enemy of religious experiences, that knowledge is hindrance to belief, and that Christianity is at its essence an irrational religion.

This distorted spirituality will spread the wrong belief that the more intellectual people is, the less spiritual they are and this spirituality even promotes the wrong belief that the truth of the cross is, at its core, anti-intellectual.

In the end, there are only two solutions which the young can choose from. One of the solutions is a binary viewpoint of seeing knowledge and belief separately as two different things, and the other one is to indulge in intellectual syncretism. Under this situation, it is not so surprising to see many Korean young people indulging in those bestsellers which are talking about the ghosts of dead ancestors.

Secondly, the essence of belief has not been transmitted.

The churches are succeeding in handing down property, buildings, systems and duties. As time goes on churches are becoming wealthier and church buildings are going up higher and higher. They are handing down their posts in church choirs or Sunday schools, but even though they are handing down these superficial systems well, they fail to transmit the substance of their beliefs, as it was, the spiritual reality. The reason why the young are leaving churches is that they can't inherit the essence of true Christian belief in the churches. We can learn more about our problems by looking at the reasons why the western churches became empty.

	Reality of Belief	Form of Belief
F1	O	O
F2	X	O
F3	X	X

F1 (the first believer generation) are those who had both the reality of belief and the form of belief. They met God through personal experiences and their moral life changed as the result of their belief.

F2 (The second believer generation) inherited only the mode of belief rather than the reality of belief also. They are still attending services on Sundays, giving offerings, contributing in churches and living a Christian-like life, but beyond these outward forms of spirituality they have lost inward reality.

The last generation, F3, is at the stage where they lose the form of belief and the reality of belief as well. They stop going to the church as well as cease to have an inward relationship with God. This is the very reason there are so many empty churches in western countries; it is the F3 generation. They have lost interest completely in churches which have only forms and systems. Suppose that the first generation F1 had had only the form of belief, the situation would have been much more serious.

This diagram shows what happens when young people do not have the proper spiritual education at church or at home. This is often because the churches they are in have the same problems that the present society has. Even if a person does not understand the way a computer works, they can still perform an internet search. It is the same way with churches. Churches can take people through all the practices of church without ever really teaching them the true substance of the Christian faith. This is how generations are lost.

Churches are transmitting information about the Christian life rather than life itself. This is what Paul warned at the early church ages as one of the symptoms of the end of the world in 2 Timothy 3:5, having a form of godliness but denying its power. The result of this is powerless spirituality is the eventual separation of young people from churches.

Therefore, this is the time that we have to try to hand down both the reality and the form of belief to the next generation. Jesus wants our feelings, intelligence, talents, and body as well as our souls. That is comprehensive spirituality. (Luke 10:27) "He answered: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and Love your neighbor as yourself."

Thirdly, they are inundated in a new wave of ideas, Postmodernism.

Evangelicals regarded themselves as superior to the other religions until their ideology became dissolved into the situation we see nowadays. Now the young have lost their curiosity and motivation in their religious lives. They are not interested in the search for absolute truth. They don't even believe it exists. In addition to that, they believe that the outside world is too pluralistic and exciting for them to put their hearts and souls into religion.

This trend is one of the results of the new-ecumenism movement which has a pluralistic

conception of religion. This mindset is one of the effects of modern philosophy and has a liberal, pluralistic understanding of other religions.

Especially those young people who are influenced by modern philosophies like Postmodernism have difficulty feeling that there are any important differences among religions. This way of thinking regards Christianity as only one of many different religions that are all equally valid, rather than absolute truth. The church is facing a great challenge in giving the gospel to young people because they do not accept that there can be the absolute truth contained in one religion?

It is natural that those young people once were curious about Christianity have left churches and have been attracted by the secular world. These young people consider themselves as unbelievers or keep on church hunting as religious pilgrims. It is possible that they have religious experiences in the other religions even though they are false experiences.

The loss of the absolute truth is the proof of relativism which is well established in the hearts of the young people. According to the survey done by George Burner in America, the result shows that more than two-thirds of the respondents replied no to the question "Do you believe in the absolute truth?" The more surprising thing is that more than fifty percent of the evangelicals answered this question negatively.

The next question was "Do you think that Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists believe in the same God?" For this question he got the same reply. Again more than fifty percent of Evangelicals agreed answered the question positively. These results show the fact that more than half of the believers who belong to the evangelical churches deny that Christianity is absolute truth. This is a very serious fact and it is the origin of the Pluralism which has become well established in American society nowadays.

We Korean churches haven't yet reached at that point, but the time of having the same problem is getting nearer. I think that among those young people who have left churches, many of them had never met Jesus. And this even sometimes includes even those people who have had very passionate Christian experiences. In that case, usually the reason is that they didn't have the right religious experiences or couldn't get the intellectual answers to their questions. It is similar to the Jesus Experience which was in popular in 1960-70s in Europe. They believed in Jesus not because of their true spiritual rebirth, but perhaps because of some shallow and transient motivations. One of the Korean poets, Ku-Sang, says that "Korean people use Jesus as they use insurance." In the meantime, young people continue to leave the churches where they can't find the honest answers to their honest questions.

Next, they are disappointed in the community life they see in the church.

What do you think the reason is that young people are moving around so much to

experience community? There is a deeper reason than mere curiosity driving them. I think it's because they yearn for an example of the deep and warm community life which has been lost for a long time. Young people want a place where they can experience the depth of Christian community. Here I confess that this problem is the weakest point of Korean Churches.

Korean churches are full of wounds. Many of those wounds are caused by the distorted and broken relationships between people. Still more broken relationships are caused by controversies, conflicts, and divisions which could have been restored if we had tried harder to establish reconciliation.

Are those challenges big enough to neglect the teaching of Jesus to love your neighbors as yourselves? It is a pity that our belief is not powerful and profound enough bring harmony in Christian communities. The saving blood of Jesus has changed our hearts, but not our deeds in our real, everyday life! Young people are grieving because of the fact that churches, which should be the light and salt of the world, are open to this criticism.

This is especially true of those young people who are conscious of social issues. They feel shame and feel that they have not lived up to their responsibilities to be prophets for our society and the present government doesn't have the legitimacy that their actions toward social issues would earn them. They feel powerless to do anything about social evils such as injustice, corruption, abortion, etc.

Many of the Christian young people are disappointed at themselves for their double-faced social life, conflicted relationships with the opposite sex, and their greedy eyes to important and high posts in society. They think of themselves as nominal Christians who don't exhibit much of a difference with unbelievers in terms of their everyday life.

Lastly, they lost godliness in worship.

Being in a church service is the best way of fostering belief and giving education to young people. Worshipping God is the most earnest way of adoring God away from their busy lives of work and study. They can acquire Christian personality and have good fellowship with brothers and sisters in God through worship and it is the best opportunity for education. Nowadays churches are losing this godliness in their worship and rigidity or flippancy is taking its place.

The tight schedule of service, habitual repeated rituals, formal confessions, framed prayers, spiritless hymns, and stereotypical rhetoric messages are the examples of this rigidity of worship. The noisy music, frequent clapping, tedious offerings, and unnatural humor in services have become very flippant. I don't even want to mention the administrative rigidity of churches which stifles communication among the people. Young people especially can't stand the rigidity and flippancy of services in church.

Those young people who are living in the complicated and noisy modern culture want a spiritual atmosphere in which they can truly experience the glory of God. Of course their everyday life itself should be worship to God, but Sunday service should have the spiritual substance which is so important to them. It is natural for them, in light of this, to go to the Roman Catholic churches where they can experience more solemn services. It doesn't mean that the atmosphere itself is the spiritual substance, but at least they notice there the company of thirsty young people.

Young people have a great desire in the cultural benefits, too. People are saying that there are many cultural benefits in the churches where there are many young people. All the various facilities and even the food in church attract young people. The social image of the churches which consists of the fellowships among the church members and the sense of belonging are important, too.

This is not an exhaustive list of why young people are leaving churches. For example, some people are leaving churches when they are confronted with difficult afflictions. They feel the churches don't have the spiritual, intellectual, and strong basis to solve their problems. Others are leaving because of the shocks from the modern society.