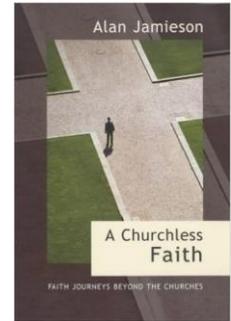


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A Churchless Faith – faith journeys beyond the churches

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Fascinating and necessary piece of research. He's a NZ pastor and sociologist, has interviewed 100+ people who have left churches of which they were previously long standing and committed members, and 50 church leaders, to find out why these people leave and what happens to them. The churches in question are what he calls EPC churches – evangelical/pentecostal/charismatic. They are by and large 'successful' and growing churches with a strong sense of mission.

He concludes that the essential reason people leave is that the church they are at doesn't make it possible for them to move to the next stage of their faith journey; it recruits them, teaches them, equips them, but eventually they feel they are outgrowing what has previously been helpful to them. And so they leave, taking their skills, children and wallets with them. He looks at what he sees as 4 categories of church leavers, and suggests that they represent 4 stages of a post-church journey, a journey which should be a continuation of the one they've been on since becoming Christians, but which doesn't fit readily into the way an EPC church is run. He interprets these stages in the light of James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, and concludes that the church badly needs to learn to help these people continue their journey without making it necessary for them to leave in order to do so; the church needs their maturity.

He suggests that this problem is becoming increasingly acute. Historically he thinks most church members have belonged to Fowler's Stage 3 (acceptance and conformity to a fairly clear set of defined values), but that the postmodern culture increasingly acts as a catalyst which moves people from stage 3 to stage 4 (personal reflection and evaluation). Most EPC churches don't offer people the scope to make this transition; they are stage 3 churches, with strong norms and shared values, where questioning and wanting to explore different ways of being Christian is seen as a threat to the structures and mission of the church. The answer is to find ways of permitting people to move from stage 3 to stage 4 without them having to leave; it means acceptance of questioning, permission to look for other influences, go on other journeys, develop into new patterns of life and faith without telling them off for non-conformity. It means more DIYness in churches, less control/tradition.

1. Face to face with those who leave

Lots of case studies in the book, interviews. Most leavers form a small group with others, and continue their journey together; but they don't regard this as church.

Brierley: 'the country is littered with people who used to go to church but no longer do. We could well bleed to death.' EPC churches are growing rapidly worldwide; but in the West they have a back door as wide open as the front door, with people leaving all the time. Need to understand who and why.

Most adult leavers are in 30s and 40s, married, employed, children. Most have held key leadership positions in their churches. Most continue in their Christian faith.

2. EPC churches

Many young people join house churches, with a freedom which fits in with their postmodern culture; but when they grow the parent church suggests more structure is needed, with formal leaderships, pastors.

Fundamental convictions of EPC churches : scripture; Christ as saviour of sinful humanity; HS; conversion; evangelism; community. Reduced focus on issues of social justice, political concerns, ongoing development of an individual's faith beyond conversion and early discipleship. New worship forms show shift away from a focus on church of history and God of eternity to a focus on the needs, wants and concerns of the individual member – reflecting the individualism of society. They draw in young people and focus on church growth. Willow Creek is the largest church in the US, and the leading example of an EPC church.

NB no such thing as a churchless faith; all followers of Christ are by definition part of the church.

3. The leaving process

Most leave gradually. Doubts, seeking alternatives, negotiating turning points, developing new sense of identity are all stages of leaving. Doubts can be triggered by changing life circumstances, contact with different worldviews; takes form of disenchantment with the whole package of church. People seek alternatives, feeling they no longer fit in, feeling their growing edge is foreign to the concerns and focus of their church community, feeling in a vacuum. Eventually they make a firm decision to leave. Pastors mostly completely fail to understand the process they are going through, and see leaving as to do with the pressures of society – new leisure opportunities, women working, work demands. Leavers say no; they focus on the church structure and leadership as the reason for leaving.

4. Disillusioned followers (group one)

Angry leavers. Charismatic churches which went with experience over scripture; autocratic leaders; lack of support during personal/family crisis. These are 17% of the leavers. They stick firmly to their faith, without really wanting to change or question it. They avoid the institutional church but continue involvement with parachurch events/organisations, TV broadcasts, tapes, books.

5. Reflective exiles (group two)

This group grumbles not at the specifics of their EPC churches but at the foundations of them; 'meta-grumbles'. They question the function, role, place of church itself; the core beliefs, values and expected behaviours. It isn't OK to do this; it tends to threaten the foundations of the community itself. These people see good in what the church is doing, but feel constricted. They leave, and react against what constricted them – often chucking the baby out with the bathwater. They are no longer satisfied by simplistic solutions, and are conscious of realities that previous certainties failed to incorporate. Their pushing away from anything which reminds them of church often leaves them without the resources they need to navigate beyond their present faith position. 30% leavers.

6. Transitional explorers (group three)

This group focus on finding a new way forward. Often this means finding a way of incorporating not just thinking but feeling into their faith, belonging to a group which allows questioning and exploration of feeling – why do you feel the way you do? Often means taking on wider Christian traditions than typical of EPC churchmanship. A small minority end up moving to other faiths – those who lack a clear personal experience of God at work in their lives. 18% of leavers.

7. Integrated wayfinders (group four)

Perception that EPC faith is scriptural but lacking in compassion. These people ground their faith on examined personal experience. They accept that other traditions and faiths also embrace truth, in contrast to narrow faith of disillusioned followers. They seek to integrate their faith into all aspects of their lives. They recover the desire to support and give to others. They suggest that EPC churches are strong on evangelism but weak in their emphasis on faith maturation; members remain children, dependent on leaders. 27% leavers.

8. Bringing it all together

Analogy : person joins swimming club, learns to swim at beach by going every Sunday morning. Gets a lot out of it. One day wants to explore beyond the blue flags; not allowed to. Swimming becomes less exciting and fulfilling; end up leaving the club. Not that they aren't grateful for what they learned; just that now they need to move on, and there's no scope for that within the club.

Fowler and Faith Development. EPC churches cut selves off from Catholic spiritual directors and concepts of faith as a journey. Leads to reduced understanding of the need for faith development. Leavers see moving on as the next step; as a progression, not an abandonment. Classical Catholic writings help us understand this as a normal part of the Christian life.

Fowler identifies 6 stages in the faith journey:

1. The innocent (intuitive/projective) : preschool children, faith understood through family experience

2. The literalist : age 6+, interpreting Bible stories literally

3. The loyalist (synthetic/conventional) : individual tuned to the expectations and judgements of significant others. About belonging, external authority. Most common stage in church members. Often accompanied by dualistic understandings: good/bad, sacred/secular, saved/unsaved.

4. The critic (individuating-reflective) : hardest transition; emergence of sense of self that will stand out against the significant others of the past. Reassessment of everything received, trust in own perception, symbols and rituals not helpful; self-sufficiency, chafing against a leadership structure that requires them to be dependent.

5. The seer (conjunctive) : embracing the contradictory. Four hallmarks:

- Awareness of need to hold together polarities in one's life, eg masculine-feminine, old-young
- Felt sense that truth is more multiform and complex than previously apprehended; learning to live with ambiguity, mystery, wonder, irrationalities
- Second naivety, readiness to take on reality in new way
- Openness to truths of traditions and communities other than one's own (coupled with committed belief)

People at this stage love mystery and relish the vastness of the unknown; identify with perspectives other than their own. Their faith is nurtured by the faith of parents, significant leaders, writers and the lives of others, but it is their own compilation, and deeply held.

6. The saint (universalizing) : better described through poetry than by definitions. 2 major transitions – removal of self from the centre, and complete acceptance of authority of God in all aspects of life. Stage reached by very few people, and none before age 60.

People leave churches for 3 reasons:

- internal desire to move beyond faith stage already reached
- external context that is able to sponsor the desire of the individual
- being part of a church which discourages people from exploring the faith stages that their own internal
- desire and external context are fostering.

Living in a postmodern society increasingly acts as a trigger to encourage people to move to the later stages of faith development; postmodernism doesn't do stage 3 (conformity). It is open to doubt, questions, willingness to critique, ability to see truth as complex.

So. Group 1 (disillusioned followers) are in Fowler's stage 3.

Group 2 (reflective exiles) are between 3 and 4.

Group 3 (transitional explorers) are in stage 4.

Group 4 (integrated wayfinders) are in group 5.

Only 1.6% of people reach group 6, all over 60.

9. Jumping ship – making your own way

Analogy of leaving the cruise liner. Some left standing on the quay, helpless. Others travel on, finding own way.

It isn't that church is changing but that they are; it isn't the time for them to change the church. What they need most is to be told where they are at is normal. They are refining and redefining their relationship with God.

Some churches support potential leavers – by encouraging them to come or not come, feel free to take space; and by asking them to use the time in other ways that nurture their faith, doing new things. To appoint a mentor is also helpful.

Many experience a tough transition, especially before stage 5. Like a wall, a dark night of the soul, in which we have to decide again whether we are willing to surrender and let God direct our lives. Yet it brings as rich an encounter of God as life offers.

The journey through the wall has 4 phases:

- Awareness: of shadow sides and hidden parts, finding out who we are, as opposed to who we would like to be or who others say we are
- Forgiveness: of selves and others; new encounter with grace and forgiveness of God
- a new acceptance of ourselves, an embracing and compassionate holding of our own humanness, failure, sexuality; celebrating the full range of our humanness – clown, devil, frightened child, wicked witch, lonely lover, intellectual snob, overachiever, arrogant elitist, insecure boy/girl, outlandish dresser, attention-seeker, fool, risk-taker, addicted one, beauty queen, perfectionist
- a new emergence of love, for God, selves, others. It is a love rooted in self-knowledge and the knowledge of the encounter of God with us; it realises that evil and sin can lie in us all and yet that we can be loved. It differs profoundly from what we

have known before; and is a knowledge founded on deep inner transformation. Because of this transformation, the journeyer is increasingly able to love others.

Result: a new encounter with God, life- and faith-defining. This is what happened to Job. God turns out to be bigger than he had previously appreciated. And with this humbling comes a softening within him. It brings a deep awareness of the reality of God, of God's order, measure and beauty in all things; an awareness which is at the same time soft, humble and open to the needs of others. The journey through the wall leads to tremendous gains: a softening of our personality and faith, which incorporates a greater acceptance of our own humanity and allows us to accept the humanity of others. A new acceptance of others that can look past their behaviour and shadow sides and accept them with all the insecurities, fears and ambitions that motivate them. A place of deep forgiveness, a new openness and depth of connection with others, a new energy for giving and forgiving, a new desire to connect with others who are different from ourselves.

10. Leaver sensitive churches

Often EPC churches are confused/threatened by people's desire to leave. Ez 34, Mt 18 on following lost sheep. They don't. But churches need the leavers – their experience, time, skills, efforts, wallets; they tell their stories to others, they take their children with them (who aren't at that faith stage and still need structure). Churches need to be leaver-sensitive as well as seeker-sensitive.

Churches need to:

- provide places for people to explore, question, doubt
- provide a theology of journey
- provide resources for people in dark places
- provide models of other theological understandings
- provide models of an honest Christian life which don't just consist of 'shoulds' (many EPC churches offer weekly diet of shoulds, which rarely correspond to the reality of the people's actual Christian lives)
- provide room for emotions and intuitions
- understand the leaving process and pick up the clues that people are going through a faith struggle early

11. Searching for a place to belong

Most leavers get themselves into some kind of group of likeminded people, post-church groups which provide a forum to discuss topics and issues not normally up for discussion in EPC churches. They are effectively looking for new ways of being church. Like most of society, they reject a metanarrative that provides certainty, coherence, completeness. Emerging church in the West includes high priority on relationships (so has to be small), focus on what is honest and real, desire for minimal structures, rented rather than owned buildings. Yet EPC churches are built on the opposite. Need to watch out!

The leavers themselves are unaware of the extent to which what fits their needs alienates others from different faith stages – including their children, non-Christians, young people. People have to start with earlier stages, they can't jump.

A thought: lack of people in stages 5 and 6 means added vulnerability for those moving from 3 to 4 and 5. When people feel the need to move beyond the given certainties of a stage 3 faith, they need orthodox experience of those further along the road. Otherwise they will turn to the only voices available, which are essentially secular. Thus the route to liberalism, and the capping of the effectiveness of a whole national church.