I was born in 1995, firmly planting me in the category of “Millenial”. Some of us hate the label, as it conjures up mental images of avacado toast gobbling, skinny jean-wearing, caffeine and nicotine fueled basement dwellers who spend more time on their iPhones than actually communicating with people in real life (hardly a fair representation). Much more importantly, the term refers to a generation born in the Internet age — most of us are well educated, well informed, and not very well off.

I was raised in church, and as an adult, have done my fair amount of church hopping. I have seen many of my friends leave church, and can understand in so many ways their reasons why. It’s not that we are looking for church with strobe lights and a sick worship band. It’s not that we want the pastor to don street wear and throw a couple PG cuss words into the message to “spice things up”. And we don’t need the church website to use the labels “contemporary”, “relevant”, “seeker-sensitive”, or “Coffee shop located in the lobby”.

We want church to be real.

Some of my friends left church because the church was too “fundamental”, or in non-Evangelical-ese, it had too many rules the Bible couldn’t back up. The church informed them of the fine details of how they should live, who they should associate with, who they could date, how they should dress, places to go and not go, colleges they could and couldn’t attend and other generally life-altering guidelines. Churches formed their doctrines, the doctrines spawned rules, and the rules distracted from the message of Christ, instead of pointing to Him.

Other friends left because they married young, got divorced, and between the judgemental criticism of the church of their failed marriage, and the fact that the church had been the one advocating marrying ASAP (as to avoid fornication), the betrayal was to great. The dissolution of their marriages was blamed on not submitting enough (if they were female) or not leading well enough (if they were male). They have been labeled adulterers if they remarried.

Other friends left because they felt that literal Bible interpretation was not how the Bible was intended to be read. They are inquisitive, they do their own research, and when certain things didn’t seem to match what they were being taught, they had questions. When the questions went unanswered, or worse, were discouraged entirely, the doubt crept in.

Other friends left because they felt that the church shys away from social justice issues. Minority groups felt a bit disenfranchised from majority group church culture. My politically minded friends were only encouraged to speak up about their beliefs if they were far right conservatives.

These reasons are valid. And the arguments against those same reasons hold validity as well.

Most churches hold on to a specific set of doctrine. After all, without some sort of organized beliefs or denominational definition, what would inform a visitor whether they were about to walk into a Catholic, Unitarian, Pentecostal, or Methodist church? All of these churches are very different and they all believe that they are right.

Most Christians believe that fornication is wrong and that marriage is to be encouraged. So it stands to reason churches promote getting married young (and a new influx of babies and children don’t hurt their attendance numbers either). The purity movement has been pushed and pushed and in turn, has pushed many young people away from the gospel.

If the Bible is inspired by God, shouldn’t we as Christians believe every word of it? So many churches will hold on to every letter as fact, and without contradiction; they don’t give room for mistranslation, and take many (arguably poetic or colloquial) passages as literal.

And, as for social justice, most churches don’t want to even begin to delve into issues such as race, gender, and socioeconomic equality. Those aren’t easy issues to tackle, and speaking on those topics is an easy way to get labeled anything from “Communist” to “bigot”.

These are some of the reasons why Millenials leave church. I write this not to give answers on how to fix the church, but to give a voice to the people my age who are making the decision to leave church. They aren’t leaving because the churches are boring, too small, too old, or don’t serve coffee. They’re leaving because they did their research, they have opinions and questions, they think for themselves, and they are socially conscious.

I have not left church for long, ever. God has always pulled me back to Him, and no matter how much I disagree with parts of church culture, there is something about devoting my Sunday morning to Him. But I understand how and why Millenials walk away. Some will walk away from religion but not from Jesus, but others will throw out their faith altogether. And if we don’t do something, there soon will be ever more meager numbers of people my age sitting in my Father’s House. For this, I mourn.

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