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Coveting Relationships Over Association:
The Church's Response to the Millennial's Exodus

Submitted to Micah Meek

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by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT
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This project identified the reasons church-affiliated millennials in Tyler, Texas, have exited the church after reaching adulthood and have failed to return in significant numbers. To capture the reasons for this generational church exodus, area millennials were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey. To participate in the survey, millennials must have regularly attended an Evangelical or Catholic church during childhood and adolescence and stopped attending church after age eighteen. The survey invitation was distributed through emails and the social media platform Facebook. The invitation contained an embedded hyperlink that directed participants to Survey Monkey. All survey results reside on the Survey Monkey platform. This project's survey results were compared with those of previously published national surveys. The reasons given by Tyler-area millennials for exiting the church are like the national surveys. Compared to national surveys, the percentage of Tyler-area millennials who exited the church at eighteen is higher than nationally surveyed millennials. The results of this project revealed unique reasons for Tyler area millennials exiting the church. By appropriately responding to these results, church leaders will avoid the conjecture often associated with the millennial generation's church exodus. More importantly, the results of this project will give area church leaders greater insight and knowledge on how to address these issues and reengage with this absent generation properly.

Millennials, previously church-affiliated, church exodus, absent generation,

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Acknowledgments

First, this work is dedicated to my Lord Jesus Christ, whose unfailing love, grace, and

mercy pursued His reluctant servant who had refused His initial calling and ran to Tarsus so

many years ago. Second, this work is dedicated to my loving wife Menda, my strongest advocate

and supporter. God has truly blessed me with you. Lastly, this work is dedicated to my church

family for their willingness to walk beside their shepherd on this journey in the endeavor to

pursue God's will for His church and His glory.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A glance across the skyline in most urban and rural settings reveals the historical prominence of the church in America. For generations, the institution of the church was considered a central aspect of the community. For many individuals residing in these communities, church affiliation was considered part of life, and worship attendance was a general expectation. "Church membership was seventy percent or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of sixty-eight percent in the 1970s through the 1990s. However, in the past twenty years, the decline in church membership has accelerated with a twenty percent decline occurring since 1999."[1] This dramatic decline has garnered the attention of sociologists and church leaders, all attempting to reconcile the reasons for this predominant and growing societal shift that has resulted in apathetic views of the institutional church by some, the abandonment of religious beliefs by others, and an increasing number of empty church pews across America.

Church attendance and affiliation continue as two leading barometers utilized by ecumenical leadership to evaluate the effectiveness of community integration and usually coincide with localized church ministries and evangelistic outreach programs within the community. More specifically, church attendance and involvement have historically been viewed as foundational signposts representing the spiritual health of an individual, a family, and, thus, the community.

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[1] Jeffery M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," Gallup, April 2019, https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx.

The decline in church attendance and religious affiliation within the adolescent age cohort reaching adulthood is not uncommon.[2] Nevertheless, many pre-millennial young adults born before 1981 would eventually return to church and religious affiliation. This return usually coincided with completing higher education, employment, or establishing a family. However, unlike previous generations, this returning trend significantly decreased with the advent of the Gen-Y generation, better identified as the millennial generation. Born between 1981-1996,[3] the millennial generation continues to make their mark on society, including the religious landscape.

Today, twenty-nine percent of millennials claim no religious affiliation or have rejected the typical religious labels used to categorize a personal religious belief structure. Instead, many hold an ambiguous view toward religious identification and thus identify as religious nones. In doing so, Millennials continue to drive the growth of the religiously unaffiliated.[4] Those within the Millennial cohort who reject religious affiliation cite various reasons for their separation. Reasons such as the church's views on objective morality, homosexuality, and abortion are given for their separation from the church.[5] Because of these positions, Millennials feel the church does not reflect the love that is repeatedly portrayed in scripture. As a result, Millennials view the Christian faith with greater skepticism, criticism, and resistance than previous generations.[6]

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[2] Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades."

[3] Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Group, January 17, 2019, https://pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins.

[4] Michael Lipka, "Millennials Increasingly are Driving Growth of Nones," Pew Research, May 12, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones.

[5] Seema Mody, "Millennials Lead the Shift Away from Organized Religion as the Pandemic Tests Americans' Faith," *CNBC*, December 31, 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/29/millennials-lead-the-shift-away-from-organized-religion-as-the-pandemic-tests-americans-faith.

[6] Barna Research Group, "A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity," September 21, 2007, https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity.

Furthermore, this criticism is partly derived from a skeptical view and distrust of large

corporations, which includes the institution of the church.[7]

The unaffiliated millennials give evidence to support this cynical view of the church by

pointing at the highly-publicized scandals that continue to plague the church and the hypocrisy

they have witnessed on a personal level which has led to their distrust of the institutionalized

church, church leadership, and of professing Christians.

As a generation, millennials are more accepting and open to change than previous

generations. With four out of ten millennials professing to hold liberal views on social issues,

millennials not only support, but lead the charge for greater racial and gender equality in the

workforce and society.[8] Additionally, unlike previous generations, many millennials have a

favorable view toward immigration, the acceptance of same-sex marriage, and support the

legalization of abortion.[9] With these worldviews in mind, many within the millennial cohort

view the church as old-fashioned, judgmental towards specific social issues, and out of touch

with today's society. Many within the millennial generation cohort have rejected the traditional

religious landscape and the importance of church-based religious activity in their lives. Instead,

millennials desire to rid themselves of the restrictiveness and conformity believed to be

associated with religion, and they do not want to get bogged down in the details and distinctives

related to faith systems that have characterized the thinking of older Americans.[10]

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[7] Frank Newport, "Why Are Americans Losing Confidence in Organized Religion? Gallup, July 16, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/260738/why-americans-losing-confidence-organized-religion-aspx.

[8] Pew Research Center, "The Generation Gap in American Politics," March 1, 2018, https://pewresearch.org/politics/2018/03/01/the-generation-gap-in-american-politics/.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Pew Research Center, "American's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape.

A growing number of previously affiliated millennials have replaced institutionalized religion and corporate belief with a personalized spirituality encompassing a syncretistic worldview into their religious belief structure and, for many, the results can have devastating effects. Recently, many high-profile and influential leaders within the evangelical church have announced that they were in the process of deconstructing their faith. This deconstruction process consists of a personal examination and reevaluation of one's faith and belief structure by questioning every aspect of previously held beliefs, views, and religious and theological positions. Although this deconstruction process can lead to the abandonment of personal belief and faith, reaffirm of one's belief structure.[11]

While millennials were the generation to lead the church exodus, the effects of the church and religious separation on subsequent generations have escalated. The religiously unaffiliated increased marginally in the pre-millennial generation cohorts. However, in the post-millennial cohort, Gen-Z, those born between 1997-2012, the religiously unaffiliated are thirty-four percent, and this generation is more likely to hold an atheistic or agnostic view of religion as opposed to previously unaffiliated generations.[12] Church and the religiously unaffiliated have not remained generationally static nor within generational boundaries; the cross-generational religious erosion has become cumulative, with "three-in-ten adults in the U.S. professing no religious identity. Currently, Christians outnumber religious nones slightly more than a 2:1 ratio. However, in 2007, the margin of Christians versus religiously unaffiliated was a 5:1 ratio."[13]

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[11] Brian Zahnd, *When Everything's on Fire: Faith Forged from Ashes* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 2021),46.

[12] Daniel A. Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America," Survey Center of American Life, March 24, 2022, http://americansurveycenter.org/generation-z-future-of-faith.

[13] Gregory A. Smith, "About Three in Ten U.S. Adults are Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, http://pewreseach.org/religion/2021/12/14–about-three-in-ten-US-adults-are-relgiously-unaffiliated/.

Seeking to grasp the foundational reasons for this generational church exodus and their continued absence, ecumenical leadership, and social science continue to produce volumes of research to gain a deeper understanding of the lynchpin causation for this infectious generational erosion.

Ministry Context

Rural East Texas is not immune to the millennial generation's church and religious disengagement, and for smaller churches, this generational absence can be particularly detrimental to the long-term survivability of a rural church. Reflecting the national research, millennials in rural East Texas, who previously participated in religious and church affiliation before adulthood, have quietly left the church after reaching adulthood and, unlike the preceding generations, have failed to return. The millennial generation's exodus from church and religious affiliation in Tyler, Texas, is evident by their continued absence. However, no specific research has examined the influences that may have contributed to the decision to separate and remain detached from the church and religious affiliation.

Sharon Baptist Church is a rural church established in 1876, located outside Tyler, Texas. Currently, ninety percent of the congregants attending Sharon Baptist Church are within the silent generation cohort, born between 1928-1945, and the baby boomers, born between 1946-1964. Presently numbering less than a hundred in attendance, many existing congregants are generational families who inherited family homesteads and thus remained or returned to the surrounding community at some point during their adult life. Many silent generation congregants returned from military service or, after acquiring a higher education, returned to homesteads on surrounding family farms and assisted their aging parents while establishing a family. The same familial obligation continued within baby boomer and Gen-X cohorts, born between 1965-1980,

which resulted in a weekly church attendance of 350 during the 1980s. However, after Gen-X, the succession of generational homesteading appeared to gradually diminish along with the heteronomous influence that once viewed Sharon Baptist Church as a community stable. The once strong heteronomous influence, which appeared to produce a cohesive family belief structure and reinforced the need for communal church association for over a century in the area surrounding Sharon Baptist Church, has continued to diminish. The demise of the once strong familial influence began with the degradation of the core family unit. Millennials also desired to gain independence from an imposed familial religious influence of their childhood. With the absence of spiritual leadership within the home, coinciding with the acceptance of the socio-cultural influences enveloping their daily lives as emerging adults, the once strong heteronomous influence that appeared to produce a cohesive family belief structure and reinforced the need for communal church association for over a century in the area surrounding Sharon Baptist Church has continued to diminish.

Ministry Problem

The problem this project addresses is to determine why many previously church-affiliated millennials residing in the Tyler, Texas area left the church after reaching adulthood and have failed to return. As with many churches, Sharon Baptist Church has witnessed a significant decline in church attendance from the post-baby boomer generations over the past several decades. Once viewed as a community mainstay, Sharon Baptist Church has witnessed severe attendance deficits, poor community response to outreach, and financial hardships due to this decline. A glance across a Sunday morning worship service reveals an aging congregation and limited attendance by millennials and subsequent generations. However, this generational erosion did not occur overnight.

This generational absence, in conjunction with an aging congregation, has church leadership perplexed in mounting a substantive response to this declining crisis. Fearing the possibility of losing the existing congregants if too much emphasis was placed on outreach while also not fully comprehending the Millennial Generation's view towards the church, the remaining congregation's response to this decline was to not engage in the surrounding culture but rather to turn inward or huddle. This huddling action was, in essence, a survivalist mentality for the struggling church to avert further congregational erosion. Church leadership theorized that the reason for this local generational absence was similar to previous generations, which was emerging adults desiring temporary independence from the familial influence that would eventually subside, and the absent generation would return. This congregational huddling perpetuated an impassive wait-and-see if they return view and proved to be the demise of any attempts to initiate or maintain any meaningful church-wide relational discipleship outreach in the attempt to reconnect with the absent generation. The result of this congregational huddling led the church further away from its established purpose of loving others within the community, which is antithetical to its creation.

Realizing the wait-and-see position held by the existing congregation towards this absent generation was not producing the anticipated results, an attempt to combat the church's continual community drift, church leadership decided to initiate some changes to attract a younger generation to Sharon Baptist Church. For example, hymns that had been traditionally accompanied by a piano was replaced by a worship team utilizing contemporary music. Accent lighting illuminated the stage as song lyrics were displayed on wall-mounted screens. Formal dress was replaced by casual attire to perpetuate a more relaxed, informal, and inviting atmosphere. To further provide a welcoming environment for potential guests, a coffee bar was

erected in the foyer area. Although well-intentioned, these changes were spontaneous and derived solely from unresearched speculation by church leadership. No consultation with existing congregational Millennials or community research was sought. Instead, leadership continued to assume that previously successful outreach programs, such as Vacation Bible School and Fallfest programs would generate community interest. While these programs continue, they are mainly supported by present church member families only, with limited response from the community. Second, church leadership believed that a one-size-fits-all nationally published outreach programs that had enjoyed success in other regions of the United States could be transposed without regionalized adaptation. For example, Sharon Baptist Church leadership imposed the framework and vision of the Purpose Driven Church that was instituted by Saddleback Church and Rick Warren in Lake Forest, California, with great success. This purpose-driven vision was enacted by Sharon Baptist leadership without the consideration of the unique traditional influences attributable to an aging congregation in a rural church environment. Additionally, during this time, the population surrounding Sharon Baptist Church began to change.

Historically, the community and the congregation at Sharon Baptist Church possessed conservative political ideologies and religious views. However, with a new influx of culturally and socially diverse residents settling into the community possessing different ideologies and religious views, these traditional conservative views became less predominant in the area. While the aforementioned worship changes were enacted by the church leadership to attract these new residents was met with congregational resistance. Many of the older congregants feared that these changes were the first steps in eroding the traditional heritage of the church. Ultimately, these changes further contributed to a fractured relationship between the church leaders and the

existing congregation. Consequentially, many of the older congregants left the church, and the enacted changes produced little results in reaching the absent Millennials within the community.

Although the pastoral team has been replaced, the effects of the church division have left the remaining congregation hesitant to explore outreach initiatives that could possibly result in failure. While the church division occurred over twenty years ago, and the pastoral team was subsequently replaced, the lingering effect of the church division continues to be a barrier in community engagement.

Over the past two decades, these and other attempts by Sharon Baptist Church to remain relevant and reach this absent generation have produced little results. The inward movement is counter-intuitive to the health and growth of the church and the gospel proclamation, and the result has left the church stymied with a declining congregation.

Purpose Statement

Rural East Texas is no exception to the millennial generation's absence inside the church. Many within this cohort attended church and professed religious association during their formative and adolescent years, yet they left the church after reaching adulthood and no longer attend church and do not profess a religious affiliation. Although national surveys have examined the reasons for the generational absence, no specific research has been conducted in and around Tyler, Texas, to understand the reasons for millennial religious disengagement.

The purpose of this project is to collect and assess the background information and influences that have contributed to the decision of previously affiliated millennials residing in Tyler, Texas, who no longer have a church or religious affiliation after reaching adulthood. Second, the results of this project will provide some of the definitive reasons for the millennial generation's church absence and will aid in removing assumed reasons for the millennial

generational church exodus by ecumenical leadership. The resulting data from this project will

provide Sharon Baptist Church and other church leaders greater insight and clarity into the

changing views millennials residing in rural East Texas have formulated after adulthood towards

religious beliefs and church involvement. The knowledge gained through this data can be utilized

as a catalyst both at the local church level and regionally through the Smith Baptist Association

to enable church leaders to enter into a more informed dialogue with this absent cohort. Most

importantly, this project can provide specific information and be an impetus in removing

generational conjectures held by some within the church towards the millennial generation.

Furthermore, the resulting data from this project can be utilized to address specific reasons for

their church departure and aid in formulating and implementing new outreach approaches

specifically to reach the disassociated generations residing in Tyler and East Texas.

Assumptions

This project's objective is to gather regionalized information from the millennial age

cohort residing in the Tyler, Texas, area for their reasons for leaving the church and not returning

after reaching adulthood. In gathering this data, the following assumptions are considered. First,

there is the assumption that the survey participants will respond honestly to the questions

presented in the survey questionnaire. In order to garner the most honest responses to the survey

questions and minimize social desirability bias by survey respondents, an anonymous online

survey will be utilized.[14] Next, there is an assumption of a predominant generational ideology

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[14] Michael Suh, "How Many People Would Say That They Believe in God if They Were Able to Answer in Complete Anonymity?" December 21, 2010, Barna Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/12/21/how-many-people-would-say-that-they-believe-in-god-if-they-were-able-to-answer-with-complete-anaonymity.

within the millennial generation cohort that is witnessed in their political, socio-cultural, and

religious views, which could influence their views of the church and religious association.[15]

The union of politics and religion is not a contemporary event. However, the resulting

polarization undergirded by personal and generational ideologies continues to impact America's

religious landscape. The result of this political-religious union is a widening partisan and

ideological division, and the demarcation is generally between the older generations consisting

of the silent and baby boomer generations and the younger generations consisting of the

millennial and Gen-X generations. This political ideology polarization has resulted in many

individuals who have been historically conservative and liberal moderates in both the Republican

and Democratic parties moving toward extremism in their personal views.[16] As an example,

according to the findings in a 2002 report by Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, in 1998, 15.2%

of liberals were unaffiliated, as opposed to the range of 5.1% and 8.5% of unaffiliated in other

ideological groups, which include: leaning liberals, moderates, leaning conservatives, and

conservatives.[17] In a 2018 study that utilized the same groupings, sociologist Ryan Burge

revealed a direct correlation between religious disaffiliation and political ideology. In his

findings, Burge concludes,

> What can be observed is clear and unmistakable; disaffiliation is directly related
> to political ideology. In 2018 the unaffiliated included 43.6% of liberals, 30.5% of
> those who leaned liberal, 21.7% of moderates, 13% of those who leaned
> conservative, and 9.8% of those who identified as conservative. A liberal is twice
> as likely as a moderate and four times more likely than a political conservative to

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[15] Pew Research Center, "Religion Among Millennials," February 17, 2010,
http://www.pewresearch.org/religion-among-millennials/.

[16] Ryan Burge, *The Nones*: *Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*
(Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011), 52–53.

[17] Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why Americans Have No Religious Preferences: Politics and
Generations," *American Sociological Review*, 67, no. 2 (April 2002):167-168. https://doi.org/10.2307/3088891

be unaffiliated. It is fair to say that liberals have always been more likely to be unaffiliated, but the disparity has never been so large.[18]

Burge's analysis supports the influence of political alignment dictating religious association, or in the case of many within the younger generations, religious disassociation. Michele Margolis concludes, "Recent scholarship seems to be pointing more and more to an understanding of politics as the first cause and religious affiliation lying downstream of that. Instead of deciding whom they will cast a ballot for based on their religious tradition, more Americans pick a church that lines up with their view of the political world."[19]

Next, there is an assumption that personal socio-cultural views can contribute to an individual's religious views. While not as polarizing as political alignment, the generational division on various socio-cultural topics is witnessed between the younger and older generations. For example, millennials lead the view against racial discrimination and the need for greater racial equality. A 2017 Pew Research poll cited that millennials believe racial discrimination is the main reason blacks cannot get ahead in society; this percentage is up from 24% in 2012, representing a twenty-four-point gap separating the oldest and youngest generations. Additionally, 79% of millennials view immigration as a positive, and they feel immigration strengthens rather than burdens the country compared to 66% of Gen-Xers, 55% of baby boomers, and 47% of the silent generation.[20]

The generational gap has narrowed on specific cultural issues, and millennials continue leading other generations to favor the change. Regarding same-sex marriage, millennials support this union with a 73% approval rating, compared to 65% of Gen-Xers, 56% of baby boomers,

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[18] Burge. *The Nones,* 53.

[19] Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018),58.

[20] Pew Research Center, "The Generation Gap in American Politics," March 1, 2018, https://pewresearch.org/politics/2018/03/01/the-generation-gap-in-american-politics.

and those within the silent generation divided at 41% in favor, and 49% opposed.[21] A June 2022 annual Gallup Values and Beliefs report reveals that the general support for gay marriage is 71%. According to the poll, subgroups historically resistant to gay marriage, such as the sixty-five and older population, as well as the increase in Protestant support in 2017 and Republican support in 2021, have moved to support gay marriage and attributed to this approval increase. However, the poll also reveals that the sub-group that remains resistant to supporting same-sex marriage is the weekly churchgoers, with 40% in favor and 58% opposed to same-sex marriage.[22]

With the recent Supreme Court ruling overturning the 1973 Roe v. Wade case, the issue of abortion is again a highly debated and divisive topic. In a public opinion survey, the view on abortion reveals only modest generational gaps, except for the silent generation for the legalization of abortion in all or most cases. Sixty-two percent of millennials support the legalization of abortion, followed by Gen-Xers at 59% and baby boomers at 53%. The silent generation cohort is divided on this issue, with 48% believing abortion should be legal in all cases and 47% believing abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.[23]

As with same-sex marriage, views on abortion in the religiously affiliated subgroup remain behind the general population's support for legalized abortion. A May 2022 Pew Research report revealed, "Seventy-four percent of white evangelical Protestants feel abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. By contrast, 84% of the religious unaffiliated feel abortion

[21] Ibid. Pew Research Center, "The Generation Gap in American Politics,"

[22] Justin McCarthy, "Same-Sex Marriage Support Inches Up to New High of 71%," Gallup, June 1, 2022. https://news.gallup.com/poll/393197/same-sex-marriage-support-inches-new-high.aspx.

[23] Ibid.

should be legal in all or most cases, as do 66% of black Protestants, 60% of white Protestants who are not evangelical, and 56% of Catholics."[24]

A variety of factors can influence religious views and affiliation. For the millennial generation, these factors may include the societal influence driven by social interaction and social media. Unlike previous generations, millennials were the first generation to have the ability to explore and investigate beyond regionalized homogenous views in a variety of areas including political alignment, views on socio-cultural issues, other religious views and positions including affiliations. These views can challenge and influence previously held religious affiliations, teachings, and doctrinal positions for millennials and others.[25] Some of the earliest research on the millennial generation's religious views revealed a continuation of previously established theological positions that had been imparted to them before reaching adulthood, including the essentiality and positive influence of the church.[26] However, with the continued polemic differences between the church and secular society, many within the previously affiliated cohort now question their previously held biblical and theological views.

Definitions

Silent Generation. A cohort of individuals born between the years 1928-1945.[27]

Baby-Boomer Generation. A cohort of individuals born between the years 1946-1964.[28]

Gen-X Generation. A cohort of individuals born between the years 1965-1980.[29]

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[24] Pew Research Center, "Public Opinion on Abortion," Last Modified May 17, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/fact-sheet/public-opinion-on-abortion.

[25] Pew Research Center, "Religion Among the Millennials," Last Modified February 2010, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

Millennial Generation. A cohort of individuals born between the years 1981-1996.[30]

Gen-Z Generation. A cohort of individuals born between the years 1997-2012.[31]

Theism. A belief in the existence of God.[32]

Atheist. An individual holding an ideology or position of 1) *Classical Atheism*: a rejection of the god of a particular nation. 2) *Philosophical Atheism*: may be contrasted with theism, which affirms a personal, self-conscious deity; not a principle, first cause, or force. 3) *Dogmatic*

Atheism. A position of absolute denial of God's existence. 4) *Practical Atheism:* does not deny God but lives a life as if there is no God.[33]

Agnosticism. A general term used for the view that a person cannot know either in practice or in principle whether there is a God.[34]

Religious Syncretism. The fusion of two or more religious beliefs.[35]

Deconstructionism (Faith Deconstruction). Originated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, deconstruction was originally utilized in the study the of metaphysics, and later used in literary, religious, and legal text. The foundational concept behind deconstruction is the belief that objective meaning is impossible to discover. Therefore, to deconstruct is to take apart a text along the structural fault lines created by ambiguities inherent in one or more of its key concepts or themes to reveal the equivocations or contradictions that make the text possible.[36]

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[29] Pew Research Center, "Religion Among the Millennials."

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1182.

[33] Ibid., 112.

[34] Ibid., 38.

[35] Ibid., 1158.

[36] Nancy Holland, "Deconstruction," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,

Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Sociologist Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton gave a descriptive definition to the American youth after examining the results of a National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The basic tenets of the MDT belief structure are:

> A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Good people go to heaven when they die.[37]

Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR). Individuals who view being spiritual in nature may or may not identify as a member of a particular religious belief or religion.[38]

The Gospel (*Euangelion*). The joyous proclamation of God's redemptive activity in Christ Jesus on behalf of humans enslaved by sin.[39]

The Great Commission. The biblical injunction embodies the command of the Lord to carry and proclaim His gospel to all nations. The message includes the historical events of the incarnate Christ's life, particularly His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second coming.[40]

Evangelical. A religious belief structure typically associated with Protestantism affirming the following tenets of Christian belief: 1) A person who holds the Bible in highest authority. 2) Encourages non-believers to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior. 3) Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of a person's sin. 4) Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation. Church

https://iep.utm.edu/deconstruction/.

[37] Christian Smith & Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–63.

[38] Barna Research, "Meet the Spiritual but Not Religious," April 6, 2021. https://www.barna.com/research/meet-spiritual-not-religious/.

[39] Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 512.

[40] Ibid., 524.

denominations considered to be historically evangelical include but are not limited to the following: Assembly of God, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, Pentecostal, Seven-Dat Adventist, Presbyterian, and Reformed.[41]

Catholic. In the early patristic period, the term catholic had the denotation of universal, During the Reformation the term catholic denoted those churches that adhered to the papacy in contrast to the groups identified as Protestants. The modern definition assigned to the term catholic refers to the designation of an individual as a member of the Roman Catholic Church.[42]

Neoliberal Capitalism. An ideology or policy model that prioritizes economic growth with an emphasis placed upon the value of free market competition, the movement of production from the public sector to the private sector that results in enhanced free trade minimum government intervention.[43]

Weberian Elective Affinity. A term used by sociologist Max Weber to "describe the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. It refers to the resonance or coherence between aspects of the teachings of Protestantism and the ethos of the capitalist enterprise."[44]

Religious Nones. Individuals that are unaffiliated with any organized religion; may identify as spiritual but not religious.[45]

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[41] National Association of Evangelicals, "What is an Evangelical?" https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical.

[42] Ibid., Ewell, 215. xy

[43] Liz Manning, Neoliberal Capitalism: What Is It?" Investopedia, Last Modified July 29, 2022, https://www.investopedia.com/terms/n/neoliberalism.asp. See also Prabhat Patnaik, "Neoliberal Capitalism and Its Crisis," October 24, 2017, https://www.networkideas.org/news-analysis/2017/10/neo-liberal-capitalism/.

[44] Oxford References, s.v. "Weberian Elective Affinity," https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095745725.

[45] Barna Research Group, "Meet the Spiritual but Not Religious."

Gender. The multidimensional construct that encompasses gender identity and expression as well as social and cultural expectations about status, expression, and behaviors as they are associated with certain sex traits.[46]

Limitations

Both Gallup and Pew Research groups classify the unaffiliated cohort as atheists, agnostics, and those who profess no religious affiliation. Although the atheists and agnostic cohort have remained virtually static in the change percentile, the no religious affiliation grouping within this cohort continues to escalate.[47] To gain a deeper perspective on the reasons for this disassociated movement, this project will limit its inquiry to those within the unaffiliated subgroup that previously professed church association and religious affiliation. Secondly, national statistical data reveals a multi-generational decline in church affiliation. However, this project will focus on the disassociated subgroup within the millennial generation cohort, those born between 1981-1996, technically identified as the Gen-Y generation. It is within this generational cohort that the dramatic decline of church and religious affiliation is witnessed in national research. Third, due to the small percentage of other religious beliefs within the Tyler, Texas area, this project will focus on the statistical research gathered from millennials who profess a previous affiliation within the Evangelical and Catholic belief structures. Fourth, Pew research reveals that survey respondents are more at ease and honest about discussing religious positions and views when utilizing an online survey versus in-person surveys or random

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[46] National Academics of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, "Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation," 2022, The National Academics Press, https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26424/measuring-sex-gender-identity-and-sexual-orientation.

[47] Jeffery M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup, March 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx.

telephone surveys.[48] In order to gain the most forthright and honest responses to the survey questions, this project will utilize an anonymous online survey platform to gather statistical data. Fifth, this project will provide foundational statistical data as to the views of the millennial generations towards the church and religious affiliation; however, this project will not offer a definitive response to the statistical data. Last, although each question within the survey questionnaire is independent and can be reflected within the accumulative data, the participant's failure to complete the entire survey or return the questionnaire promptly can weaken the p-value of the data.

<div align="center">

Delimitations

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Due to the dramatic reduction of the millennial generation in church attendance as compared to the baby boomers and Gen-X population, according to Gallup News Service, this research project is focused exclusively on the millennial generation age group, ages twenty-five to forty-one, in the area of Tyler, Texas.[49] This area contains a high millennial generation and will encompass the Sharon Baptist Church community. To gain a greater understanding of why a previously affiliated survey participant no longer attends church, only survey participants who attended church regularly, which will be defined in this project as a person who attended a scheduled church service a minimum of one time per month before reaching the age of eighteen will be surveyed. The exclusion of those who do not meet the attendance criteria allows for a greater focus on the previously affiliated participants and the attributing factors that influenced their subsequent decision to separate from the church and now profess no religious affiliation.

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[48] Pew Research Forum, "Measuring Religion in the Pew Research Centers American Trends Panel," Last Modified January 14, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/01/14/measuring-religion-in-pew-research-centers-american-trends-panel/.

[49] Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time."

Internet surveys are commonly used by millennials, and the anonymity avails the opportunity for more open and honest answers to the survey questions. This project will utilize an independent online survey website.[50] The online survey questionnaire will require previously discussed geographical, religious, and attendance limitations. The questionnaire survey will consist of both closed and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions will allow the survey participant to provide greater explanatory clarification to the closed questions responses and provide further insight into the specific reasons for church disassociation.

Thesis Statement

National research surveys provide a myriad of reasons for the absence of millennials from church affiliation and religious association.[51] However, the reasons for this generational absence in and around Tyler, Texas have been speculative. The aim of this project is to identify why millennials in this area have left the church and have failed to reengage in the local church after reaching adulthood. It is hoped that area ecumenical leadership will utilize the data gathered from this project to gain a greater understanding of the views of millennials residing in the Tyler area have toward the church and religious affiliation and be the impetus for evangelism and discipleship through the building of relationships while addressing generational concerns.

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[50] Pew Research Center, "Religion Among the Millennials."

[51] Pew Research Center, "Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services," August 1, 2018, http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/.

Chapter 2: Conceptional Basis

In March of 2021, Gallup Research reported the reality of religious decline in America. For the first time in an eight-decade trend, church membership in the U.S. fell below fifty percent. According to Gallup, this decline is directly attributable to the number of Americans who express no religious preference.[1] Currently, in the U.S., roughly three-in-ten adults profess no religious affiliation, and thirty-five percent previously held a church and religious affiliation during their formative or adolescent years. However, of those who previously held a religious affiliation, fifty-seven percent claimed to have left their childhood religion to become unaffiliated and stopped identifying with their childhood religion when they were younger than eighteen years of age.[2]

Several factors may contribute to the decline in religious and church affiliation. According to researchers, population change is the most significant contributing factor to the decline of religious and church affiliation. This shift occurs when the older generations, such as the Silent Generation and older Baby Boomers, who were likely to be church members, are being replaced by the Gen-X and Millennials generations, who are less likely to be religiously affiliated. This population shift from religious affiliation to unaffiliated is evidenced by the results of the annual Gallup Research report, where the declining percentage of church

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[1] Jefferey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for the First Time." The article reports in 2020, forty-seven percent of U.S. adults belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. This number is down from fifty percent in 2018 and seventy percent in 1999.

[2] Daniel A. Cox, & Jacqueline Clemence, Eleanor O'Neil, "The Decline of Religion in American Family Life," American Enterprise Institute, December 11, 2019, https://www.aei.org/research-products/reports/the-decline-of-relgion-in-american-family. See also Gregory A. Smith, "In the U.S. Roughly Three-In-Ten Adults Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are--now-religiously-unaffiliated.

membership has risen and mirrors the percentage of increase of the religiously unaffiliated in America.[3] Another contributing factor to the rise of the unaffiliated may be the result of the Millennial Generation's ambivalence toward the Christian faith and their willingness to openly question and express doubts about the Christian faith of their childhood. A period of church and religious disengagement of young adults is not exclusive to the Millennial Generation. Research reveals a progressive decline in church attendance within the Baby Boomer and Gen-X generations prior to the advent of the Millennial Generation.[4]Millennials have led the charge in the church exodus movement and by voicing their views about and doubts about the institution of the church and the Christian faith, they may also be a contributing to other generations exiting the church and declaring a spiritual but not religious position.[5]

A period of church and religious disengagement of young adults is not exclusive to the millennial generation. Research reveals a decline in church attendance before the advent of the millennial generation.[6] However, what has increased with the advent of the millennial generation reaching adulthood and progressively crossing into other generational cohorts is the number of Americans publicly professing to be spiritual but not religious.

Spiritual but Not Religious

Unlike the atheist, who denies the existence of a god, or the agnostic, who states a person cannot know if a god exists, many within the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) cohort maintain a belief in a higher spiritual being or a god. However, they do not desire to attach a

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[3] Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for the First Time."

[4] Les Blank and J. Mark Ballard, "Revival of Hope: A Critical Generation for the Church*," Christian Education Journal*, 9, no. 2 (2002):8. See also Barna Research, "A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance," August 4, 2022. https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-2022. These articles reveal the changing dynamics in church attendance or shifting by generations and cross-generationally.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

specific religious label to their personal belief.[7] Yet, the most prevailing worldview within the

SBNR cohort is a syncretistic or a blending of religious views and traditions into an

individualized spiritual belief.[8] Several scholars have identified a collection of cultural influences

that has allowed SBNR to be an option for the contemporary seeker. These influences include

democracy, immigration, globalization, pluralism, the high cultural emphasis on individualism

and pragmatism, the rise of secularized consciousness, the impact of visual and social media, and

the pervasive networks that constitute neoliberal capitalism.[9] Robert Fuller and William Parsons

note that while these influences do not constitute direct causal sources for the SBNR movement,

they do represent what historians call a Weberian elective affinity, where certain cultural forms

seem to gravitate toward each other in time.[10]

Although the ethos of divorcing spirituality from religion is difficult, in the mind of the

SBNR advocate, "spirituality is said to be individualistic, personal, holistic, and malleable while

religion is considered institutional, dogmatic, moralistic, and nonessential to spiritual growth."[11]

Upon examination, the distinctions between spirituality and religion may appear to be apparent,

however, both have similar overlapping functionality. Linda Mercadante identifies these

similarities as 1) belief in some kind of larger reality or transcendent force, 2) desire to connect

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[7] Pew Research Group, "Why American 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," August 8, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/08/why-americans-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/. Barna Research Group, "Meet Those Who Love Jesus but Not the Church," March 30, 2017, http://barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-the-church/.

[8] George Barna "American Worldview Inventory 2021: Introducing America's Most Popular Worldview-Moral Therapeutic Deism," Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, April 27, 2021,

https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content-uploads-2021/05/CRC AWVI2021 Release02 Digital 01 20210427.pdf. This article labels the syncretism worldview as Moral Therapeutic Deism.

[9] Leigh E. Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco, Harper, 2005), 187–89. See also Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3–4, 14.

[10] William B. Parsons, ed. "Spiritual but Not Religious: Introduction," *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, and Future,* First Edition (London, Francis & Taylor, 2018), 15. https://doi.org.esproxy.library.edu/10.4324/97813115107431.

[11] William B. Parsons, ed. *Being Spiritual but Not Religious,*112.

with this force, 3) rituals and practices that aid in this connection, and 4) behaviors that foster or demonstrate that connection.[12] Nancy Tatom Ammerman suggests that instead of SBNR separating spirituality from religion, the distinctions allow for "boundary-setting or a boundary-maintaining discourse rather than an actual rejection of behaviors considered religious. The result of these boundaries allows the participants to carve out personal theological territory."[13]

As an example of their boundary setting, many SBNR proponents completely reject the idea of God or a transcendent being. Some hold an idea of transcendence as a sacred dimension larger than self, while others affirm that infinity resides solely within, which leads many to claim to be their own personal god. Many reject the notion of sin, more specifically the idea of original sin; instead, many hold a belief of subjective morality and feel that man is good and moral by nature and morality is individually subjective. SBNR individuals also reject the exclusive claim held by the Christian faith. Instead, they feel that all religions teach the basic tenets of right and wrong.[14] While Ammerman suggests that SBNR individuals are boundary setting, in reality, the SBNR spiritual position is a form of pantheistic and relativism, the results of this theological carving are the complete rejection of many of the central tenets of the Christian faith.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The results of a research study conducted in 2003-2005 by the Nation Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) on adolescent spirituality in America revealed a prevailing "do good and be happy" theological view within Christianity that is, at best, "only tenuously connected to

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[12] Parsons, *Being Spiritual but Not Religious,* 112.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 216–23.

historical Christian tradition."[15] This view results in "either Christianity is degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious faith."[16]

Labeled as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, this spiritual view espouses an understanding of God as a "distant creator who desires humans to be nice and fair to one another and who intervenes in human experiences only when called to bestow blessings or resolve problems. The metanarrative of MTD reveals the purpose of life is happiness, self-fulfillment, and a degree of goodness sufficient to earn entrance to heaven."[17]

The issue today is that the prevailing view residing with the youth and emerging adults in 2005 has persisted into adulthood and is firmly rooted within the Americanized view of Christianity. This view is affirmed by the research data in the most recent Cultural Research that states, "a person's (religious) worldview develops when they are young and is refined during their teens and 20s, and then serves as a decision-making foundation for the duration of a person's life. Without conscious retraining, it is unlikely that worldview will change during a person's lifetime."[18]

An increasing number of Americans hold this spiritual view "primarily a reflection of their parent's religious devotion or the lack thereof, and, by extension, that of their congregations."[19] While spiritual leadership and discernment begin in the home under the tutelage and guidance of the parents, the church is equally culpable and responsible for teaching

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[15] Smith & Denton, "Soul Searching." The authors identify MDT as a view whereby central to living a good and happy life is derived from being a good, moral person.

[16] Ibid.

[17] David Satran and Chris Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 22. ProQuest eBook Central.

[18] Satran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*.

[19] Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York, Oxford, 2010), 5.

spirituality under the guise of Christianity or, at the very least, for not correcting this

misguidance. "The fact that a greater percentage of people who call themselves Christian draw

on Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than draw from the Bible says a lot about the state of the

Christian Church in America."[20] As the National Study of Youth and Religion decries,

> There is a theological fault line running underneath American churches: an adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world. Instead, churches have proliferated an imposter faith that poses as Christianity by perfecting a codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism that lacks holy desire and missional clarity for discipleship ... and most young adults are happy to hold this semi-religious position that has carried over into adulthood and on to the next generation.[21]

The prominence of this unitarianistic view continues to escalate, with recent research

revealing that seventy-four percent of MTD advocates continue to identify as Christian.

However, many of the core beliefs of MTD are antithetical to a biblical worldview.[22] Some of

the MDT beliefs include: 1) A belief in God that is distant and does not intervene in creation

(deism), 2) People are generally good (morality), 3) The universal purpose in life is personal

happiness, 4) No absolute moral truths, 5) God allows good people to go to heaven 6) God places

limited demands on people.[23] As Len Munsil states,

> Driven by current culture more than by historic religious truths or comprehensive and coherent doctrine, this approach to spirituality asks little of its followers while providing the comfort, convenience, and community its practitioners long for. Many of the under fifty generation embraced MDT in their formative years. What was once a rouge belief system that characterized Christian teen culture now

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[20] George Barna, "American Worldview Inventory 2021."

[21] Ibid.

[22] Cultural Research Center Staff Writer, "Counterfeit Christianity: 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,' Most Popular Worldview in the U.S. Culture," Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, April 27, 2021, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/04/27/counterfeit-christanity-moralistic-therapeutic-deism--most-popular-worldview-in-u-s-culture/.

[23] Barna, "American Worldview Inventory."

permeates both American culture and the Christian church, and the result is that it has now become the most popular worldview in the United States.[24]

American society thrives on having the ability to choose, and in a customized religious belief structure, Moral Therapeutic Deism is the product of choice at the expense of organizational commitment. For many within this cohort, who are resistant to institutionalized religion, MTD is the avenue that breaks strident religious beliefs and practices that do not conform to their personal views. As George Barna states, "young adults have grown up with a culturally adulterated version of a Christian faith. They have adopted a softer, twisted version of genuine Christianity where the emphasis is self rather than on God, emotion rather than truth."[25]

Two millennia have passed since Paul's epistle to the Colossian church, in which he warned against a collaged religious view of Christianity, and yet religious syncretism remains alive and well in the contemporary church. In the early part of the new millennia, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton were of the first to sound the alarm forewarning the ecclesiastical community that a "morphed view" of the Christian faith had gained a foothold in the American youth, and this view would challenge the traditional Christian view of God and the historical tenets of the Christian faith. Smith and Denton assert, "We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition."[26] Michael Horton believes that MTD is not a product of "evangelicalism becoming more theological liberal but that it is becoming more theological vacuous, where God is not

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[24] Cultural Research Center Staff Writer, "Counterfeit Christianity."

[25] Barna, "American Worldview Inventory 2021."

[26] Smith and Denton, *Soul-Searching,* 262.

denied, but trivialized and used for our life programs rather than received, worshipped, and enjoyed."[27]

Over time, inside many Christian churches, a new, more palatable teaching has emerged from the lecterns and pulpits across America that professes an easy Christianity of euphoric psychological spiritualization while denying the central tenets of the Christian faith (2 Tim. 3:1–5).[28] As Horton and Wilburn assert, "A growing number of evangelical leaders espouse a 'new kind of Christianity' where they find it more appeasing to their audiences if they 'set Jesus' teachings on the kingdom over and against the more doctrinal emphasis, especially in Paul's epistles and portray Christ as an example rather than Christ, the redeemer."[29] Instead, this new kind of Christianity portrays Jesus as "a dressed up corporate CEO, life coach, cultural-warrior, political revolutionary, philosopher, co-pilot, co-staffer, moral example, and partner in fulfilling our personal and social dreams. But in all of these ways, we have reduced the central character in the drama of redemption to a prop for our own play."[30]

Garnering a descriptive from parasitology, author Kendra Creasy Dean views MTD as a religious symbiote. Parasitologists define a symbiote as two organisms that inhabit the same space while the weaker one draws life from the stronger one. Dean states MTD is "an alternative faith that feeds on and gradually co-opts if not devours," establishing religious traditions. The alternative faith generally does not and cannot stand on its own. So, its adherents are affiliated

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[27] Michael Horton and William Wilburn, *Christless Christianity: Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008):15.

[28] Central tenets of the Christian faith include the following: 1) The Bible is the inerrant Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17). 2) All of humanity are sinners (Rom. 3:10, 3:23). 3) Jesus is the only hope for salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). 4) The deity of Jesus (John 1:1, 1:14). 5) The sacrificial death of Jesus (John 3:16). 6) The bodily resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15: 16–18). 7) The return of Jesus and the hope of eternal life (John 14:3; Acts 1:11).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Horton and Wilburn, *Christless Christianity*,19.

with traditional faith communities, unaware they are practicing an extremely different faith than orthodox Christianity.[31]

MTD View of Moralism Versus Biblical Orthodoxy

Although many MTD advocates label their belief as Christian, an examination of the MTD guiding principles reveals the polarizing views between Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and Christianity.[32] In reality, the MTD view is antithetical to Christianity because it distorts the biblical and orthodox picture of God, people, and salvation.[33]

The commonly held beliefs of MTD include a god who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth. Although this god watches over his creation, he is not involved in a person's daily life, except when needed to resolve a problem.[34] This deistic view of a god portrayed as an uninvolved distant being opposes the orthodox Christian belief and contradicts biblical Scripture.

Biblical Scriptures refute the understanding of a distant god. Instead, the God of the Bible is witnessed in His creation (Gen. 3:8). Repeatedly throughout Scripture God promises his presence which brings peace and comfort to His children (Deut. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:9; Heb. 13:5; Ps. 23:4; Matt. 28:20). Ultimately, His presence is revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Matt. 28:20; John1 4:16–17). His name Immanuel, meaning "God with us," points to God's desire to have a relationship with humanity (Matt.1:23; John14:27). Even death cannot separate people from the presence of God (Ps. 23:4; Rom.8:38–39). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit reveals

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[31] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 5.

[32] These MTD guiding principles are not to be considered an exhaustive listing. It is, however, the generalized belief principles resulting from the 2003-2005 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).

[33] Roger E. Olsen, *Counterfeit Christianity: The Persistence of Error in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 245.

[34] This view is commonly referred to as the cosmic butler view of God.

God's presence within the believer (1 Thess. 5:23; John 14:17; 1Cor. 3:16; Col. 1:27; 1 John. 4:15).

The MTD belief of a distant and uninvolved god, does not comport with the God of Scripture who desires a relationship with humanity. As the Bible reveals, God initiates and engages in a covenantal relationship with a resistant and defiant humanity. Ultimately, the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ, reveals the depth of God's love and his desire to enter a relationship with humanity (Rom. 5:8).

Next, MTD adheres to a belief that their god's desire for humanity is to be good, nice, and fair to others. Additionally, the central goal in life is to be happy and feel good about oneself. Lastly, all good people go to heaven after death. These beliefs are based upon personal subjectivity with no moral absolutes to determine good or bad and are antithetical to the biblical scriptures and are antithetical to Scripture. The Bible consistently commands believers to be kind and compassionate toward others (Eph. 4:29, 32; Mic. 6:8; Col. 3:12, Matt. 5:24, Gal. 5:22, 6:10; Isa. 54.8; 1 Pet. 3:9, 4:8; 2 Pet. 1:5–7; Luke 6:35). However, as Dean states, "The Bible has much to say about kindness and compassion but says nothing at all about being nice."[35]

For many well-intentioned Christians and churches, the area of niceness has allowed differing worldviews and religious beliefs to enter and diffuse the uniqueness ascribed to the Christian faith. Further using the parasite analogy, Dean states, "If the church accommodates all manner of sycophants without asserting our own identity because 'a host above all must be nice to his guests,' then we inevitability become a haven for symbiotes who take up residence in our space."[36] Next, the Bible refutes the MTD understanding of being happy and feeling good about oneself as a central goal for the believer. Although rewarding, following Christ is not to be taken

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[35] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 5.

[36] Ibid., 34.

lightly; followers are to count the cost (Luke 14:28). Discipleship requires sacrifice and self-

denial (Luke 18:22, 9:23). Jesus forewarned His followers of the conditions and the hardships

that accompanied discipleship. The New Testament and church history are replete with evidence

of alienation, hatred by the world, and martyrdom suffered by Christ's disciples.

Lastly, MTD espouses an understanding that good people go to heaven. According to this

view, salvation is achieved through morals and not grace. This soteriological view is a

foundationally works-based, self-righteous understanding of achieving salvation through moral

aptitude as opposed to grace alone (Eph. 2:5–6, 8–9; Rom. 4:4–6, 11:6). The MTD ideology

denies the inherent sinfulness of humanity (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 3:10, 3:23, 5:12; Isa. 59:2, 53:6), and

the need of a redeemer (Eph. 2:1–7; 1 John 2:2, 3:18, 3:36, 20:31; Titus 3:5).

Along with the Gospel of Health and Wealth (GHW), Roger Olsen classifies Moralistic

Therapeutic Deism as a heretical American Folk Religion. Olsen characterizes Folk Religion as

"a belief that replaces tradition, orthodoxy, scholarship, inquiry, biblical hermeneutics, and

theology with beliefs based on comfort and spiritual excitement or satisfaction."[37]

> Many devout Christians adopt one or the other as their primary theological belief
> system without any awareness that they are really alternatives to biblical,
> orthodox Christianity. Both stand in stark contrast to the gospel of Jesus Christ
> and historic, orthodox Christianity, and they are hardly recognizable as
> Christian.[38]

This adaptive religious view is a product of personal centrism to avoid orthodox

Christianity's difficult doctrines and resulting divisiveness. The yielding to societal correctness

has birthed a Christianity devoid of difficulties; no sinful nature, no teaching of repentance, no

personal sacrifice, where everyone can be a Christian and go to heaven despite Jesus professing

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[37] Olsen, 230. xy

[38] Ibid.

the contrary when He claimed, "Narrow is the gate to eternal life and not everyone who says to

me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 7:13–14:21).

Challenges of MTD

First-born millennials have reached the age of forty, and life has moved beyond youth

ministry and college days to the realities of adulthood and its accompanying complexities and

challenges. For some emerging adults, these life realities can challenge the unorthodox Christian

beliefs they have inherited. In 2005, Albert Mohler described the influences that shaped the

views of the millennial generation by stating,

> Teenagers have been listening carefully. They have been observing their parents
> in the larger culture with diligence and insight. They understand just how little
> their parents really believe and just how much many of their churches and
> Christian institutions have accommodated themselves to the dominant culture …
> theological conviction has been sacrificed on the altar of individualism and a
> relativistic understanding of truth. They have learned from their elders that self-
> improvement is the greatest moral imperative to which all are accountable. The
> faith once 'delivered to the saints' is no longer even known, not only by American
> teenagers, but by most of their parents.[39]

Almost two decades later, the results of "failing to teach the realities and convictions of

biblical Christianity has produced a nation that largely considers itself Christian, overwhelmingly

believes in some deity, considers itself fervently religious, but has no connection to historic

Christianity."[40] Mohler's critique is correct; what Millennials have witnessed from behind

seeker-friendly church pulpits and reinforced in the home is a fraudulent version of Christianity.

Now, as adults, in the throes of life's tensions, the truth claims of postmodernism are found

without merit and have failed to provide sufficient truth claims of personal peace and assurance

to life's daunting questions.

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[39] Albert Mohler, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism-The New American
Religion,"https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeuatic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2.

[40] Ibid.

A personal worldview is formulated through an amalgamation of various influences. These influencing factors may be viewed as both a positive or negative influence and may be viewed differently over time. However, each influence aids in worldview development. Influences such as family, religious and spiritual beliefs, interpersonal relationships, surrounding and social media-induced socio-culture, education, and personal experiences all contribute to the development of a personal worldview. Additionally, the continuous incursion of extrinsic influences can alter a personal worldview.

For many Millennials, the search for personal truth and a worldview begins with independence from homogenous family influences and religious teachings that conflict with their worldview. This independence may also include separation from the institution of the church due to its teachings and doctrinal positions that do not align with biblical scripture or the church's position does not align with their worldviews. This spiritual journey can be an intense period of introspection that can alter the course of an individual.

Faith Deconstruction

Over the past decade, the term deconstruction has garnered the attention of the Christian community. Overnight, this sparsely known word outside the discipline of philosophy and literary analysis was applied to faith, and suddenly it became a new common buzzword among evangelicals. With the news of many high-profile Christian leaders, viewed by many as stalwarts within American evangelicalism, publicly professing the questioning of their beliefs and potentially leaving the faith completely, this was viewed as another blow to the already battered view of Christianity in America.[41]

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[41]Aaron Earls, "Churchgoers Express Hope, Sadness Over Leaders Who Leave the Faith," July 8, 2020, https://research.lifeway.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/.

The Origin of Deconstruction

Originated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, deconstruction is a postmodern philosophy of language and its meaning.[42] The foundational concept behind deconstruction is the belief that objective meaning is impossible to discover. Therefore, to deconstruct is to take apart a text along the structural fault lines created by ambiguities inherent in one or more of its key concepts or themes to reveal the equivocations or contradictions that make the text possible.[43] As a simplification of Derrida's deconstruction view, Jon Bloom states,

> Deconstruction is a literary philosophy arguing that we are wrong to assume that by merely reading an author's words, we can understand something about absolute truth, since our concept of truth and our constructs of what everything means, will be significantly different from the author's truth. In Derrida's view, absolute truth cannot be obtained from the author. Only the author's construct of meaning and truth are represented in the text. The text only reveals how the author interprets what the world means. In other words, according to Derrida's meaning, it is a human psychological construct shaped by multiple influences.[44]

Kevin Vanhoozer believes Derrida's deconstruction strategy stems from his alarm over illegitimate appeals to authority and exercises of power.

> The belief that one has reached the single correct meaning provides a wonderful excuse for damning those with whom one disagrees as either fools or heretics... Neither priests, who supposedly speak for God, nor philosophers, who speak for reason should be trusted. This logocentrism can allow for the opportunity to question and possibly reject the traditional foundations of Christian belief structure and refuse to recognize the authority of those who speak from a privileged perspective within the institution of the church.[45]

Derrida's logocentric view allows not only the questioning of traditional ways of thinking but also for the "refusal to recognize as authorities those who see themselves as ones who claim

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[42] Jon Bloom, "What Does 'Deconstruction' Even Mean?" *Desiring God*, February 15, 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-deconstruction-even-mean.

[43] Holland, "Deconstruction."

[44] Bloom, "What Does 'Deconstruction' Even Mean?"

[45] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in the Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 21–22.

to speak from a privileged perspective about what truth is."[46] Furthermore, for the questioning Christian believer, applying Derrida's philosophy of language of having no fixed meaning is troubling when juxtaposed against the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and its prescribed directives for humanity.

Practical Deconstruction

The word deconstruction carries different connotations for many people. Identifying what deconstruction looks like in practice or what exactly is being deconstructed is even more challenging. Applying the critical view of deconstructionism to the sociological and religious belief constructs N. L. Norwich states,

> In a broad sense, deconstructionism examines how society defines concepts such as justice and faith. It analyzes how hierarchy and power dynamics shape societal norms, enshrining in language and law the marginalization of certain ways of being and understanding. Applied to faith communities, this framework highlights ways religious leaders may use sources such as the Bible, tradition, and doctrine to enhance their power and disempower others.[47]

The reasons and depth of deconstruction can vary individually. As Carey Nieuwhof notes, "The degree in which someone deconstructs varies wildly, and that degree is dependent on an individual's unique experience with faith and the church."[48] For some deconstructionists, this process involves the reexamination of their religious heritage and ecumenical teaching in the attempt to reconcile or integrate these aspects into societal ideologies. In doing so, these "deconstructors reexamine their religion's key assumptions and discard beliefs in anything that appears contradictory, harmful, or unsubstantiated by evidence. Usually, this is done not out of

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[46] Bloom, "What Does 'Deconstruction' Even Mean?"

[47] H. L. Norwich, "Losing Their Religion?" *U.S. Catholic* 88, no.2 (Feb 2023), 3, https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/losing-their-religion/docview/2763582119/se-2?accountid=12085.

[48] Carey Nieuwhof, "Five Real Reasons Young People Are Deconstructing Their Faith, https://careynieuwhof.com/five-real-reasons-young-people-are-deconstructing-their-faith/.

academic curiosity but in response to being personally harmed, or seeing others harmed, by beliefs, practices, or members of faith groups."[49] This attempt of societal and theological reconciliation allows for the jettisoning of what some in this deconstructionist group believe are dogmatic theological views espoused by religious authorities to maintain a power structure of clergy over laypeople. However, the critics of deconstruction claim this attempt at reconciliation is a false veneer of intellectualism or the simple loss of belief to engage in activities that are condemned.[50] As James Walden writes,

> Certainly, the term 'deconstruction' has become a matter of heated debate. For some, it is a damnable word, tantamount to apostatizing and not to be redeemed. For others, it presents no threat at all but signifies a universal painful process of spiritual transformation.[51]

For many, the journey of deconstruction is a deeply personal and painful process and may entail a partial or complete dismantling of one's belief structure. This journey includes the "questioning, critiquing, and reevaluating of previously faith commitments upon which the deconstructionist used to rely."[52] Many of these commitments have been held since childhood and are deeply embedded in the complex character of the individual. According to Swoboda and Comer, these "basic structures of belief are accepted and established, usually in the context of a family origin, church upbringing, or community where one becomes Christian. When this construction phase of theological beliefs occurs, they are accepted as is, and without

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[49] H. L. Norwich, "Losing Their Religion?" 4.

[50] Ibid.

[51] James Walden, "Deconstruction and a Theology of the Cross, "*Mere Orthodoxy,* July 13, 2022, https://mereorthodoxy.com/deconstruction-theology-cross.

[52] A. J. Swoboda and John Comer, *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith Without Losing It* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2021), 20.

questioning."[53] However, the uncritical acceptance of good beliefs can also leave open the

potential of uncritical acceptance of bad beliefs.

> It is during this stage, we often pick up the cultural, environmental, and theological additives alongside the gospel that slip in unawares. We accept beliefs about God that are good, but because we are humans led by humans, we often receive beliefs that can betray who God actually is. During this stage, we receive not only the gospel as is but also the opinions, attitudes, and postures of our new community.[54]

The careful deconstruction process allows for a critical rethinking of unhealthy

beliefs. The process of spiritual maturity entails some variation of deconstruction. The Apostle

Paul informed the followers in Philippi to "work out their salvation" (Phil. 2:12). The working

out of salvation includes deconstructing beliefs that hinder the truth of Jesus Christ and the

gospel message.

Recently, Paul Tripp implored Christians to move beyond the initial negative connotation

usually and immediately associated with deconstruction. Instead, Tripp advocated for the

essentiality of faith deconstruction in removing cultural influences that distort the biblical truth,

redefined faith, and hindered spiritual growth. Tripp states, "We should all be deconstructing our

faith because our faith becomes a culture so webbed into the purity of truth that it's hard to

separate the two. And we better do some deconstructing, or we are going to find ourselves again

and again in these sad places."[55]

Although faith deconstruction can be beneficial for spiritual renewal, caution must be

exercised in knowing the difference between healthy and harmful deconstruction. As Swoboda

and Comer state,

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[53] Swoboda and Comer, *After Doubt,* 28.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Mike Cosper, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill," *Christianity Today Podcast*, Episode 12, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/

The minute deconstruction undermines the gospel, our faith, and the Bible, we have gone too far. There is a world of difference between deconstructing wrong beliefs and deconstructing faith, and distinguishing between the two is essential; one is intellectual repentance and the other is faith abandonment.[56]

Deconstructing Christian Doctrines

While some view faith deconstruction as positive, others in the evangelical community view deconstruction as a guise utilized by progressive liberal Christians to jettison the foundational doctrines of Christianity that do not conform to a personal view influenced by postmodernity. Describing faith deconstruction as a remodeling of previously held beliefs, Jamin Hübner states,

Deconstruction simply refers to the process of questioning one's own beliefs (that were once considered unquestionable) due to new experiences, reading widely, engaging in conversations with 'the other,' and interacting in a world that is now more connected and exposed to religious diversity than ever before ... who is to define what is 'real' and what that even means.[57]

Hübner's definition is influenced by a culturally driven postmodernist view of truth, whereby truth is objectively real, nor is it universal and absolute to everyone. Instead, as Hübner suggests, truth is culturally subjective and is constructed to serve one's own interest.[58] If Hübner's statement that deconstruction is merely a remodeling of beliefs is correct, the question must be asked remodeled to what? The postmodern view of subjective truth provides no foundational premise to which the deconstructionist can obtain a starting point for reconstruction. Conversely, orthodox Christianity upholds the absolute truth set forth by God, revealed in His Son, and through His Word. For many deconstructing Christians, the rejection of

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[56] Swoboda and Comer, *After Doubt, 28.*

[57] Jamin A. Hübner, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: A Letter to a Friend and A Professor's Guide to Escaping Fundamentalist Christianity* (Rapid City: Hills Publishing Group, 2020), 20.

[58] Ibid.

objective and absolute truth claims can be the first step in complete faith demolition. As Albert

Mohler points out,

> Little imagination is needed to see this radical relativism entrenched in
> postmodernism is a direct challenge to the Christian gospel. The problem is that
> Christianity is meaningless apart from the truth claims held within the gospel
> message and to surrender the claim that the gospel is universally true and
> objectively established is to surrender the center of the Christian faith.[59]

Having endured the process of faith deconstruction, author Alisa Childers believes

deconstruction is more about refuting doctrine that does not align with the progressive movement

that has invaded America. Childers states,

> Deconstruction has little to do with objective truth and everything to do with
> tearing down whatever doctrine someone believes is morally wrong. The word
> itself is built on postmodernism and carries the baggage of moral relativism.
> Deconstructionists may even say they are simply rejecting the cultural beliefs that
> have become entangled with Christianity. But these cultural beliefs often include
> doctrines like penal substitutionary atonement and biblical marriage. But
> deconstructionists do not regard Scripture as being the final authority for morality
> and theology, they appeal primarily to science, culture, psychology, sociology,
> and history.[60]

Many deconstructionists will deny seeking to reject previously held Christian beliefs

completely. "It is common for deconstructors to adopt a different philosophical framework

around morality and ethics."[61] However, a former evangelical leader turned atheist Bart Campolo

warns of the slippery slope of deconstructionism presents by stating,

> Moving toward a more liberal view of God's sovereignty was the beginning of the
> end …once you start adjusting your theology to match up to reality you see in
> front of you, it is an infinite regress. It starts with God's sovereignty going, then

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[59]Albert Mohler, "What Is Truth? Truth and Contemporary Culture," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no.1 (March 2005), 66, https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2.

[60]Alisha Childers, "Why We Should Not Redeem Deconstruction," The Gospel Coalition, February 18, 2022, www.thegospelcolaition.org/article/redeem-reconstruction/. Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel? A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Carol Springs: Tyndale, 2020), Kindle 24.

[61] H. L. Norwich, "Losing Their Religion?" 2.

biblical authority goes …pretty soon you don't actually believe Jesus rose from the dead in a bodily way.[62]

The Results of Deconstruction

From the Christian perspective, the definition of faith deconstruction is elusive. Migrating from the literary and philosophical realms, deconstructionism has been applied to describe the process of a personal journey of religious and spiritual introspection. This personal introspection consists of the reexamining, questioning, and possible dismantling of previously held beliefs, the placement of faith, the education of orthodoxy, and subsequent orthopraxy, which is then projected in a personalized worldview.

For some deconstructionists, this process is the liberation of restrictive ecclesiastical religiosity believed to have been falsely assimilated as religious beliefs and orthodoxy constructed over centuries through hierarchical and societal influences. For others, while not entirely rejecting the general tenets of the Christian faith, deconstruction is an avenue to interject postmodern views and beliefs into a new form of theological construct as a hybrid-Christianity. Some will go further in the deconstruction process and deconstruct to the point of atheism.[63]

As with its definition, the process of faith deconstruction is also allusive; there is no one-size-fits-all process and various degrees of deconstructing a personal faith. "The biggest argument of deconstruction is deconstruction itself. There is no limit to how far a person can go."[64] The one consistent commonality in the deconstruction process that is unequivocally expressed by deconstructionists is the existence of pain. Faith deconstruction is an arduous and painful process, and "you can easily come out the other side a lonely and bitter person with no

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[62] Sam Hailes, "Deconstructing Faith: Meet the Evangelicals Who Are Questioning Everything, "Premier Christianity, March 17, 2019, https://premierchristianity.com/features/deconstructing-faith-meet-the-evangelicals-who-are-questioning-everything/267.article.

[63] Sam Hailes, "Deconstructing Faith: Meet the Evangelicals Who Are Questioning Everything."

[64] Carey Nieuwhof, "Five Real Reasons Young People Are Deconstructing Their Faith."

hope to offer the world or yourself." But the process can also bring clarity and a restrengthening of shaken faith; because deconstruction without reconstruction is a tragedy.[65]

Keeping God but Losing the Church

Despite separating from the institutionalized church, many previously affiliated millennials remain firm in the orthodox belief of God and profess a personal relationship with God. Many millennials also affirm a positive view regarding the importance of religion and its tenets in their daily life. However, it is the distinctiveness held within the Christian faith, such as its exclusiveness and other perceived rigid doctrinal views that are upheld by the church juxtaposed against religious beliefs and particular socio-cultural views, that have caused many to distance themselves from the institution of the church and has resulted in many moving to an individualistic spiritual but not religious position.[66]

Attempting to quantify the influences that have shaped the Millennial Generation's views toward the church, Sociologist Michael Hout states,

> Many millennials have parents who are baby boomers, and boomers that expressed to their children that it is important to think for themselves and to find their own moral compass. Also, they rejected the idea that a good kid is an obedient kid. That is at odds with organizations such as the church, that have a long tradition of official teaching and obedience. And more than any other group, millennials have been formed in this cultural context. As a result, they are more likely to have a 'do-it-yourself' attitude toward religion.[67]

For many in the millennial cohort, religious belief is important but, is not central to an individual's identity, nor is it paramount for daily life. Although some religiously unaffiliated millennials hold to the general orthodox beliefs of God, similar to previous generations, the

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[65] Nieuwhof, "Five Real Reasons Young People Are Deconstructing Their Faith."

[66] Barna Research Group, "Meet Those Who Love Jesus but Not the Church."

[67] David Masci, "Q&A: Why Millennials are Less Religious Than Other Americans," Pew Research Group, January 8, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/.

relevance of these religious beliefs and their inability to connect these beliefs within their day-to-day lives separates this generation.

> The beliefs are there, but often not in a way that directs millennials to behave differently or be strongly committed to those beliefs. Religious beliefs tend to be about as present in millennials as it is in other age groups, but it is more likely to be latent than active. Religion lives in the background rather than in the foreground. For the millennial, religion is more theoretical than real.[68]

Although many within the religiously unaffiliated cohort profess to maintain a relational connection to God, it is the institutional church with which the millennials have voiced their dissension. Research reveals a variety of reasons for the separation. According to Josh Packard, "Millennials profoundly admit God is not the problem, the church is the problem, and they are dissatisfied with the structure, social message, and politics of the institutional church, and have decided they and their spiritual lives are better off living outside of organized religion."[69]

One of the pioneers leading the investigation to gain a deeper understanding of the millennial generation's worldviews, including their view of the church, is author and president of the Barna Research Group, David Kinnaman. In his book, *You Lost Me,* Kinnaman reveals the millennial generation's skepticism towards the institutionalized authoritarian structure of the church. Accompanying this skepticism, millennials have a disdain for one-sided conversations, and they desire to disconnect from formulaic faith. Instead of patent responses to their questions, such as "just believe." Millennials desire to have robust conversations about how to plug the biblical teachings of scripture into daily life circumstances they are facing. Other millennials are uncomfortable with an apologetic that seems disconnected from the real world. In their view, as well as to the world, the church is known more for what it stands against than what it stands for.

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[68] Ron Sellers, "The Apathy Generation: The Latent Religious Beliefs of Millennials," Grey Matter Research, 2010, https://greymatterresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Grey_Matter_Report_The_Apathy_Generation.pdf.

[69] Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland: Group, 2015), 14.

Living in a relativistic world, millennials desire to have an apologetic based upon reason that will

undergird a viewpoint that applies to daily life.[70] The millennial generation's view of the church

is not one of an inviting communal place where one senses belonging, nor active relational

discipleship is witnessed or where the spiritual wellbeing of a young Christian believer is

paramount; instead,

> Millennials find the churches in which they were raised as not safe or hospitable places to
> express doubts. Millennials are looking for a space and a community that will allow them
> to wrestle with life's questions. Instead, they feel that they have been offered slick or
> half-baked answers to their thorny questions, and they are rejecting the 'talking heads'
> and 'talking points' they see among the older generations.[71]

Although Kinnaman's work voiced many specific reasons religious nones disengaged

with the church, Ryan Burge, social scientist and pastor, views the generational disengagement

and exodus as an individualized puzzle with many contributing factors. Burge states,

> Each individual who walks away from religion has their own reasons and their
> own spiritual journey. There are larger unseen forces in American society that can
> make the decision to change religious affiliation easier or more difficult. These
> factors can be cultural, political, theological, or just the spirit of the times. One
> individual can leave the church after years of spiritual soul-searching because
> they have a sophisticated disagreement with the pastor. Others leave because the
> congregation moved the Sunday service times by half an hour.[72]

Every generation started less religious than the previous generation. However, the

outspokenness of the younger millennial and gen-z generations has afforded other generations

who had been quietly moving toward disaffiliation to express their views of the church and their

desire for detachment publicly. The result is now the nominal Christian feels more at ease

checking the no religion box than ever.[73]

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[70] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2011), 85.

[71] Ibid., 8.

[72] Burge, *The Nones*, 36.

[73] Ibid., 81.

Considerable research has been conducted on the religiously unaffiliated cohort. This research typically focuses on the contributing factors of church departure after a person reaches adulthood, and the church departure and religious disassociation have already occurred. However, many previously affiliated individuals admit to leaving the church spiritually and emotionally prior to exiting the church physically. Josh Packard applies the label of the departed church member as a church refugee in which a person is forced to leave a place they prefer to stay, but they feel a sense of spiritual persecution if they were to remain. This person is emotionally torn between the desire to stay communally connected with the church body and, at the same time, feeling frustration that stems from a lack of personal and spiritual connection. Packard states, "forced to leave a place they consider home, for the departed member leaving the church often means giving up social connections, activity groups, and most importantly taking on a certain amount of spiritual guilt."[74] Emotionally paralyzed and spiritually drifting while becoming increasingly frustrated by the church's resistance to change, the soon departed church member first exits internally while outwardly maintaining a religious façade.[75] In essence, the wavering church member witnesses more of what they believe to be a true professing Christian and a church should be outside the institutional church than inside. Therefore, the soon-to-be unaffiliated believer feels for their spiritual well-being, and to reconnect with a God they feel has become distant to them by the structure of religion, they inevitably separate from the church.[76]

One area that millennials deem highly significant and an integral part of their decision-making process when considering leaving a church is the lack of mentorship or relational

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[74] Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 15.

[75] Rose M. LeCount, "Leaving Religion: A Qualitative Analysis of Religious Exiting," *Inquiries* 9, no. 12(2017), 7, https://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1713/leaving-religion-a-qualitative-analysis-of-religious-exiting.

[76] Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 15.

discipleship with an older adult within the church. Research reveals that millennials are twice as likely to remain in a church where they have a close personal relationship with another adult acting as a mentor. Seven out of ten millennials who dropped out of church did not have a close friendship with an adult, and nearly nine out of ten never had a mentor at the church.[77] Without an established and meaningful relationship, the young adult feels isolated in the midst of the church community. This unfulfilled need results in anxiety, fear, and frustration in the heart and mind of the weary millennial. Feelings of disappointment and anger eventually manifest into a general distrust and skepticism toward the institutional church and leadership. Furthermore, since the church represents God's kingdom in the world, millennials' skepticism and distrust of the church also include the challenging and questioning of its biblical teachings and doctrinal positions.

Research consistently reveals that millennials do not feel that church is a safe place to express their doubts and ask difficult and challenging questions as they wrestle with biblical teachings and contemporary sociocultural issues. In his book, *The New Copernicans*, author David John Seel describes millennials who have grown up in the church but are ready to exit once they reach adulthood as "conceptual slaves that typically have not been given the freedom to express their confusion and frustration aloud. Consequently, many independent thinking teens keep their doubts and disenchantments about religion and the church bottled up until college."[78] As millennials enter the world for the first time, independent of their parents, part of their maturing process is questioning and verbalizing doubts. For many who have grown up in the church setting, now residing in a society that is antagonistic towards their faith, this is the first

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[77] Barna Research Group, "5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church," September 17, 2013, https://www.barna.com/research/5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church/.

[78] David John Seel, *The New Copernicans* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 28–29.

time the belief structure of their childhood is seriously challenged to explain or defend. New

questions are presented that challenge their once stalwart beliefs, resulting in questions and

doubts never before realized. For example, from moral questions, such as tattoos, to

philosophical questions, such as the presumed conflict between religion and science are being

asked, many for the first time. By not being willing to enter meaningful dialogue about the

millennial's worldviews and interpreting their questions and doubts as a lack of faith, the church

has pushed a generation out of the pews to seek their answers and express their doubts

elsewhere. Speaking to church leaders, Seel states,

> If we would listen and understand, if we would engage on the basis of a
> comprehension of this generational shift of a differing worldview, if we would
> respect where they are in their confused spiritual journey, if we would agree to
> simply walk with them, then the angry atheism or prodigal status in college is not
> a foregone conclusion.[79]

While Seel is correct, one aspect of Christian discipleship is walking with another on

their spiritual journey. However, sound biblical teaching should accompany this journey as well;

thus, when the Millennial is engaged in a differing worldview, the biblical view provides a

platform for the engagement.

Known as a generation that forges its own paths in many aspects of life, millennials resist

homogenous pressures when forming a religious worldview. As a generation, millennials have

grown up experiencing an increase in globalization, technology information overload, and

cultural and social diversity more than other generations. This expanded knowledge and

exposure have allowed many to form opinions and worldviews independent from localized or

familial influence. Consequently, millennials no longer rely solely on the preceding generation's

views or perceptions, which they feel may be filtered through a personal worldview lens. Instead,

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[79] Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 28–29.

millennials seek and weigh the evidence from a broad spectrum of sources in forming their own

worldviews. Thus, when a millennial asks difficult questions on issues they are wrestling with,

they are wrestling with how to connect and live out their personalized faith and worldview

within the cultural construct they reside in daily. Millennials want to be a part of a church where

the difficult questions can be discussed without predetermined answers, and they want to be part

of a church community that is willing to walk with them as they navigate their spiritual journey

in a non-judgmental, supportive relationship.[80] Millennials welcome the challenge by mentors,

"we want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when

it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in

creation care, and become peacemakers.[81]

For many previously affiliated millennials, their spiritual life remains a significant and

important part of their lives, even as they live separated from the church. However, at some point

in their spiritual journey, they felt they had to choose between the institutional church and the

culture in which they reside; frustrated and hurt, the choice for an increasing number is to leave.

Although they physically leave, many unaffiliated remain spiritually and emotionally tethered to

the church because of their continued belief in God. Because of their continued belief and a

desire for communal relationship with other believers, the church has both a biblical mandate

and an opportunity to engage with this absent generation through intentional communal

interaction and meaningful dialogue, which is the foundational premise of *ekklesia* found within

the Bible.[82]

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[80] Rachel Evans, "Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church," CNN Belief Blogs, July 27, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20130805183654/http://religionblogs.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/. In this blog, the author lists several views that millennials have toward the church.

[81] Ibid.

[82] G1577– ekklēsia – ekklēsia –a calling out; a popular meeting, a religious congregation; assembly, church. *Strong's Greek Lexicon* (KJV), Blue Letter Bible, https.//www.blueletterbible.org.

The Church's Place

Residing in a world that would choose to exchange the truth for a lie is not distinctive to the contemporary post-modern world (Rom. 1:25). Thus, proclaiming the truth of the gospel in a fallen world that views its message as foolishness while exchanging the righteousness that it offers with self-righteousness will always create enmity between the church and the fallen world (1 Cor. 1:26–29; Hosea 4:6; Rom. 1:18–25; 1 Thess. 3:3–4). Regardless of the hostilities witnessed through the ages and that continued today, the contemporary followers of Christ and the church must not be deterred from fulfilling the mandate of the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 18–20; Mark 16:14–18).

Over two millennia have passed since the divine directive of discipleship and Jesus' establishment of the church. Over time the view of the church and the ideology of discipleship among believers has been transmuted from an essential element of life to an addendum or an after-thought of both the believer and the church. Unlike today, where the church is perceived by many to be a specific location such as a building or cathedral for worship, the first-century church was an integral part of society that was comprised of a unified body of believers living out their daily lives alongside both the fellow believer and the non-believer. "Like the non-believer, believers were not exempt from the daily turmoil and harshness life brought to bear," and it was the believer's response to this turmoil in light of eternity promised that garnered the attention of the non-believer.[83]

Today, for many, the church is viewed as an archaic relic, filled with members clinging to antiquated traditions of religiosity that are unable or unwilling to evolve with society.[84] The

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[83] Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD (New Jersey: Princeton, 2012), 38-40. The author summarizes the transitional growth of Christianity when the church fully adheres to Jesus' teachings in loving others as "No longer others ... they are now brothers."

growing perception of Christianity and Christians is not a view of love, compassion, or a desire

to see others within the body of Christ. Instead, the increasing view toward the contemporary

church is a separate organization where its congregants are known as anti-everything, unwilling

to move beyond their liturgical traditionalism and burdensome rules of religiosity, and not

willing even to begin to have interaction or dialogue with the people it was established and

commanded to reach."[85]

Many of the accusations posed against the church are not original to the contemporary

church. It can also be said that professing followers of Christ lured away from the church family

and ministry by the sociocultural milieu is also not a postmodern event. Just as today, these and

other issues plagued the fledgling first-century church and the professing followers of Jesus

Christ. As evidenced in the scriptures, the spiritual battle for the heart and mind of man has never

ceased (Eph. 6:12; 2 Cor. 10:3–5; 1 Pet. 5:8).[86] xy

The reasons for the contemporary generational church exodus are numerous. With the

church being the representation of God's kingdom in this world that is in direct conflict with the

"evil one" presently ruling over the world (1 John 5:19), the cost of being a disciple of Jesus

Christ can be more than some are willing to bear. Jesus knew this and repeatedly warned those

who desired to follow Him to consider the difficulty and the cost of the continual commitment

He required. "For those of you who do not give up everything, you cannot be my disciples"

(Luke 14:33). To ensure those nodding their heads in agreement completely understood, Jesus

further clarifies the extent of the love and faithfulness required for discipleship with a metaphoric

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[84] Pew Research Center, "Why American 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," August 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/08/why-americans-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/.

[85] Randall Reed and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, *The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion: Prospects and Problems*, vol. 1 (Oregon: Cascade, 2018), 15.

[86] Unless otherwise noted, all Bible references are in the *New International Version* (Biblica 1978).

statement of hatred of family and daily cross-bearing (Luke 14:26–35). Everyone in the first

century knew the extent of the meaning of the cross; it meant death, and for the followers of

Jesus, it meant putting to death everything they valued, including their lives to it. Robert Stein

states,

> Being Jesus' disciple entails primary allegiance to Him. No one and nothing can usurp his supreme position...Jesus even takes priority over family. He does not want a hasty, emotional decision. Instead, He urges those who would follow Him to think seriously, to "count the cost." Perseverance will only result after sober consideration of the cost of following Jesus.[87]

As witnessed through the New Testament scriptures, for many the cost of discipleship

was too high and the worldly enticement great. The Apostle Paul gives an example of this

struggle when he writes to Timothy about being abandoned by their fellow co-worker Demas

because of his love of the world" (2 Tim. 4:12). According to Lea and Griffin, the love described

by Paul gives a picture that "Demas' love for this world probably involved a preference for ease

and comfort along with the reluctance to share Paul's sufferings. Although anguished over the

loss of his friend and co-laborer when he needed him the most, Paul's words did not describe

Demas as an utter apostate, but they did reflect disappointment at his self-interest."[88]

The Apostle Paul was not the only one to suffer abandonment. Although Jesus amassed

great crowds during His ministry, He was not immune to desertion by professing followers

because they found His message harsh because they could not accept it (John 6:60). While

witnessing this rejection and the crowd's exodus, Jesus made His closest disciples reconsider the

cost of discipleship, "You do not want to leave also, do you?" (John 6:67). The question was a

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[87] Robert H. Stein, *Luke,* vol. 24, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scriptur*e*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 395–98.

[88] Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus,* vol. 34, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 253.

crucial one. It was bathed in emotion for Jesus."[89] The disciples witnessed the crowd's rejection

of Jesus and His message. Jesus was, in Klink's opinion, "hesitant when asking the Twelve this

question."[90] This was a pivotal moment for the disciples. A personal decision by each one was

required. A choice was to be announced, not emotionally driven by the moment, but a personal

affirmation of sustained faith and trust in Him. Jesus knew their discipleship journey would

become increasingly difficult and they would witness rejection and even worse. They could

either follow the ways of the world or follow Christ in faith. D. A. Carson views this question

not as a need for assurance from Jesus' perspective but as an outward expression of affirmation

of the Twelve's placement of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and their decision to follow Him, even

when the crowds dissipate. "Granted the certainty of Jesus' knowledge regarding those who are

His, the question is not moody, glum, but it is a challenge to the Twelve. The question is asked

more for their sake than His. They must articulate a response more than He needs to hear it."[91]

The same worldly luring offered to Demas, Paul, and the twelve apostles has not changed

in two millennia. Likewise, the same offering requiring a decision to become a disciple of Jesus

also remains resolute. The directive given by Joshua to the Israelites prevails today, "choose this

day whom you will serve ..." (Joshua 25:15), and many, like Demas, have chosen the world. As

evidenced by the millennial generation's church exodus, the lure of the world is great, and the

reasons for them to remain have not been articulated nor witnessed in the lives of professing

believers to convince the fleeing to remain.

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[89] Gerald L. Borchert, *John*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary, An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Holy Scripture, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 275.

[90] Edward W. Klink, *John,* Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 345.

[91] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John,* The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991):303.

Religious Syncretism

All religious beliefs hold to some form of a doctrine of exclusivity. The Christian faith is

no different, and it upholds this exclusive position as a direct revelation and command from God

handed down to His people. "You shall have no other gods before me ... for I am a jealous God"

(Exod. 20:3–5). This exclusive mandate is upheld throughout the Bible and is reaffirmed in

Jesus' exclusive statements like, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the

Father except through me" (John14:6). This bold statement of exclusivity continues to be met

with hatred and discontentment for Jesus and Christianity. "For the past 2,000 years,

Christianity's claims about the unique truth of Christ have aroused no end of opposition from

Jews, pagans, Muslims, Communists, humanists, and atheists."[92]

Christ's exclusive claim is a central tenet of the Christian faith, and this claim has become

increasingly antithetical within the relativistic post-modern culture.

> We might think this opposition to have lessened with the advent of
> postmodernity, given its emphasis on tolerance. Instead, the opposite has
> happened. Postmodern unbelievers grant tolerance to every religion except
> Christianity, precisely because the gospel is seen as the ultimate intolerant creed.
> The gospel's message that only Jesus can save offends postmodernity's relativist
> mantra. Christians insist that all other religions are false and any other route to
> God is a dead end. Objections to this doctrine have marked the world's hatred for
> Jesus ever since he spoke to them.[93]

Residing in an era that demands inclusion and tolerance for all, many within the spiritual but not

religious cohort cite this exclusive doctrine as one of the reasons for their exit from the Christian

faith.

Postmodern Syncretism: Spiritual but Not Religious

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[92] Philip G. Ryken, *Is Jesus the Only Way?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 11.

[93] Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Reformed Expository Commentary (New Jersey: P&R, 2014), 669.

The postmodern guise of religious syncretism is bannered as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). However, the concept of incorporating various aspects of religious or spiritual beliefs and traditions that can include aspects of mysticism and naturalism to formulate a unique personal spiritual view is not a product of postmodernity.

Although not willing to be formally labeled with a particular religious belief, many within the SBNR cohort, including many previously church-affiliated, have "denied the righteousness of God while attempting to establish their own" (Rom.10:2–3) by embracing an adapted belief structure that is a culturally-driven spirituality labeled as Christianity. Clearly, this adaptation is the antithesis of orthodox Christianity as evidenced by the denial or dismissal of many of the essential doctrinal tenets held within the Christian faith.

For example, many within the SBNR cohort believe man is inherently good, and there are many ways to heaven.[94] However, Scripture states man is inherently evil and in need of redemption that cannot be provided thru any other avenue outside the person and salvific work of Jesus Christ. Thus, the centrality of the Christian faith is based upon the person of Jesus Christ and His atonement for humanity. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of Christ, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23–24). Furthermore, the Apostle Peter affirms the centrality of Christ alone by stating, "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The central tenets of Christianity are based exclusively on the person of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for all of humanity which is contradictory to the humanist view held by some within the SBNR cohort.

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[94] Pew Research Center, "Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life," December 18, 2008, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2008/12/18/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life.

A Biblical Response to Faith Deconstruction

Spiritual clarity and faith renewal or reaffirmation between finite humanity and an infinite God is witnessed in some variances throughout the Scripture and church history. Biblical characters such as Moses, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Jonah, Gideon, Abraham and Sarah, King David, and the Twelve Apostles all questioned God while wrestling with their faith and seeking greater clarity of God's will. But their questioning was not faith deconstruction as many postmodernists attest. Instead, this questioning is a form of spiritual reformation and growth essential for spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:14; 1 Cor. 3:1–8, 14:20; Heb. 5:11–14).

The Bible is clear that a believer must mature their faith continuously. The believer's spiritual journey begins and ends with an understanding that the "beginning of all wisdom is the fear of the LORD" (Prov. 9:10). Furthermore, God's wisdom is delivered to man through His Word, and for the believer and seeker alike, it should be the primary source for knowledge and wisdom (Ps. 119:105; Acts 17:12). In order that the believer properly understands the Scriptures God also directs man to seek an abundance of wise counsel from others who also fear the Lord (Jas. 1:5; Prov. 1:5, 19:20).

The lives of the aforementioned biblical characters appear to refute the contemporary claim that questioning is the first step toward deconstruction. For those contemplating or amid deconstruction the underlying reason which has initiated the deconstruction process must be examined. For some, the deconstruction process can lead the believer to a renewed vibrancy in their relationship with Christ (Rom. 12:2). For others, deconstruction can be a yielding to cultural and societal influences leading the believer to a syncretistic religious view, which leads to the abandonment of the Christian belief structure (2 Tim. 4:3–4, 10).

The scriptures instruct how individual believers and the church should respond to those who are weak or struggling in their faith. First, the believer and the church cannot compromise

the central tenets of the Christian faith (Acts 15). Second, the believer and the church must be mindful some deconstructionists have arrived at this point in their spiritual lives for various reasons, and not all the reasons are antagonistic toward the Christian faith. Believers are to "welcome anyone weak in faith, and don't argue about disputed matters" instead provide opportunities for meaningful dialogue, while "showing compassion, kindness and patience to those struggling in their faith (Rom. 14:1; Col. 3:12; Phil. 4:5; Jude 1:22).

Theoretical Basis

In his paraphrase version of the Bible, author Eugene Peterson gives a poignant rendering of the Apostle Paul's counsel to the believers in Colossae regarding their hearts and minds toward reaching others for Christ. "Use your heads as you live and work among outsiders. Don't miss a trick. Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not to put them down, not to cut them out" (Col. 4:5–6).[95] Peterson's contemporary language rightly portrays the Apostle Paul's directive on how Christians are to live out their faith in Christ while being "in the world without being part of the world" (John 17:16). Sadly, for a growing number of religious nones, including the previously church-affiliated, Paul's directive has not been portrayed. The evidence cannot be ignored.[96] The world views believers as anti-everything separatists who are unwilling to forgo archaic traditionalism and are out of touch with society.

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[95] Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 2149.

[96] Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones. "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back," Public Religion Research Institute, 2016, https://www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/.

Additionally, the world views the church as a "what" instead of a "who." In other words, the world does not see a body of believers as the church; instead, they view the church as an institution that has outlived its contribution to society and its relevance in their daily lives. The decline in religious affiliation and church association coinciding with the escalation of the religious none cohort reveals the continued and unresolved discord between those within the church's walls and the culture in which it resides.

Despite their tendency to self-identify as Christians, an increasing number of millennials distrust church leadership and religious organizations.[97] For many millennials, including the previously affiliated, this distrust has brought a feeling of ambivalence toward their religious beliefs and its teachings of their childhood. Although they are questioning every aspect of their childhood beliefs, many with the SBNR cohort still desired to possess a sense of solace found with a spiritual connection with a greater being or a personalized god, and many SBNR advocates will label this personal view as Christian. However, this spiritualization is achieved by either compromising the essential tenets of the Christian faith by importing other religious philosophies or tenaciously rejecting what is deemed as restrictive foundational tenets and the exclusive claims held within the Christian faith.[98] Clearly, this position is antithetical to Christian orthodoxy.

As previously noted, a myriad of research has been conducted since the first millennials became "emerging adults" and garnered the attention of the ecumenical community with their

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[97] Jean M. Twenge, Ryan A. Sherman, and Joshua B. Grubbs, "Declines in American Adults' Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972–2014," *Sage Open* 6, no. 1 (2016), 2–3, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016638133.

[98] George Barna, "Millennials in America: New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence," *Foundations of Freedom,* Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University (October 2021), https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-conent/uploads/2021/10/George-Barna-Millennial-Report-2021-FINAL-WEB.pdf. In this report, Barna examines the increasing influence the millennial generations have imported on society, including a generational shift in religious ideologies juxtaposed with previous generational religious ideologies.

absence and vocalization against the institutionalized church. For some, the Christianity espoused in their church was not too far removed from other prevailing syncretistic belief structures and the transition and its incorporation into a personalized religious view labeled as Christianity would not be difficult. For other emerging adults exiting the familial homogenous religious cocoon of their childhood while simultaneously entering a culture of religious ambiguity and unbridled tolerance revealed a need for personal spiritual reflection and investigation. Suddenly, a societal offering of religious beliefs appeared to offer more of an inclusive and loving faith without the constraints associated with orthodox Christianity. This newly revealed paradox brought questions and doubts to the heart and mind of the once unwavering Christian believer. For many, this would be the first time they would seriously question their faith, the Bible, and its teachings by considering what was being proposed in the surrounding culture.

It is no secret that the church struggles to find a connection with the unaffiliated. In recent years this struggle has intensified due to some Christian leaders considered stalwarts in the Christian faith announcing they were deconstructing their faith.[99] For some Christians, struggling in their faith, these announcements were seen as permission to openly follow suit.

Clearly, the church has an image problem. As previously stated, for the unchurched and previously church-affiliated millennials, the contemporary church is not the church they believe is depicted in Scripture. Distrust of church leadership, hypocrisy, legalism, and irrelevancy in their personal lives are common themes that resonant throughout much of previous research on the unaffiliated millennial cohort. Millennials also express what they desire in a church. Millennials desire a church that provides a space and a community where doubts and difficult

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[99] Christian leaders or celebrities who announced their Christian deconstruction include Christian musician Kevin Max from the musical group DC Talk, John Steingard from the musical group Hawk Nelson, and Pastor and best-selling author Joshua Harris.

questions can be freely discussed without judgment and predetermined answers.[100] Many

millennials had little or no exposure to religious socialization due to their parents not being

involved in church.[101]

Unaffiliated millennials desire relationships, not just a Sunday acquaintance, but a

mentoring relationship, someone who will not just point them in the right direction but be willing

to walk along beside them as they navigate through life. A mentor who will allow them to ask

the difficult questions as they wrestle with the issues of life, their worldviews, and their theology.

Repeatedly millennials report that relationships are highly significant to them, and this area is an

integral part of their decision-making process when considering whether to remain or leave a

church. Millennials are twice as likely to stay in church if they have a close personal relationship

with an adult inside the church as opposed to those who are no longer active or have

disassociated with the church. Seven out of ten millennials who dropped out of church did not

have a close friendship with an adult and nearly nine out of ten never had a mentor at the

church.[102] As David Seel states, "The church needs to learn how to build relationships without an

agenda … to be with a person without an agenda, without a timetable, and without a script."[103]

To reach the unchurched and undergirded by the Apostle Paul's directive to "make the

most of every opportunity … and become all things to all people … for the sake of the gospel"

some church leaders and strategists have taken leads from the corporate entertainment industry.

In the attempt to become more seeker-friendly, some churches have moved from a more

conventional church and worship setting and have erected coffee bars and theme-park children's

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[100] Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 39–43.

[101] Rick Richardson, *You Found Me* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 88–90. Thom S. Rainer & Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 135–40.

[102] Barna Research Group, "5 Reasons Millennials."

[103] David J. Seel, *The New Copernicans,* 139–43.

ministries. Additionally, more creative styles of worship were employed, along with practical or

motivational preaching to provide a more casual and inviting environment, and this seeker-

friendly outreach has garnered a tremendous response.[104] While creativity may be inviting and

seeker-friendly church leaders must remain vigilant in teaching the entirety of the Bible,

proclaiming the gospel message, and maintain the central focus of worship exclusively on Jesus.

Mark Mittelberg cautions churches not to overstep and remember the church is in the

world, not to become part of it, even when proclaiming the gospel. "Church leaders must

communicate to their culture without ever compromising with their culture and sometimes in the

thick of ministry, it is hard to draw the line."[105] Many leaders have crossed the line for many

reasons. Pew-filling is one of the main reasons. Invitations for book deals and speaking tours are

typically not offered to pastors shepherding struggling or declining churches. As in the business

world, success is denoted not only by positive numbers, but growing numbers, and in the

ecumenical community, it is growing attendance rolls that portray success. However, for some

churches this rise in success has created disastrous falls and disheartened Christians.[106]

Furthermore, the desire for greater numbers can lead to "soft preaching." Forgoing the centrality

of God's judgment can undermine the understanding of God's grace.[107] Moreover, this soft

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[104] Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016):153-192. Andy Stanley is the Teaching Pastor at North Point Church. North Point has 30,000 members over five campuses in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Stanley views himself as a more motivational speaker than a pastor.

[105] Mark Mittelberg and Douglas Groothuis, "Pro and Con: The Seeker-Church Movement," *Christian Research Journal* 18, no.4, Last Update October 19, 2022, https://www.equip.org/articles/pro-and-con-the-seeker-sensitive-church-movment/.

[106] Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church is an example of the demise of celebrity gospel. Founded in 1996, Mars Hill had 15 campuses in 4 states, with an average weekly attendance of over 12,000 members. In 2015, after considerable turmoil for several years on a variety of issues, Mark Driscoll resigned, and the church network dissolved. Leaving many members spiritually and emotionally destroyed. In 2021, Christianity Today and Mike Cosper produced an in-depth exposé podcast series on the demise of the church. *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, www.christanitytoday.com.

preaching can lead to a view of God such as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Commenting on the

motivation behind this style of preaching Douglas Groothuis states,

> In their zeal for converts, seeker-sensitive churches may convert God's message into a form more likely to impress but less likely to save the unbeliever. If cultural relevance is our guiding principle for evangelism and church growth, we become irrelevant to God's agenda, for the gospel will always contest, subvert, and make foolish 'the wisdom of the world' (1 Cor. 1:20). We must engage the culture biblically by renegotiating its assumptions and calling into question its false gospels, false securities, and false loyalties.[108]

Apologist Frank Turek states the non-offensive gospel message propagated in most

Protestant churches today is not producing disciples. Instead, "most denominations are producing

shallow narcissists obsessed with themselves and their own happiness."[109] Driven by the moment

and emotion, this shallow belief cannot withstand the winds of life and will not sustain the

believer when walking through the valleys of death. "We fail to realize that what we win them

with, we win them to. If we win them with entertainment and low commitment, we win them to

entertainment and low commitment."[110] The result of low commitment quickly leads to no

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[107] In 2018, Pastor Andy Stanley's sermon series entitled "Aftermath: Not Difficult." In the sermon, Stanley made a controversial statement stating, "New Testament church needs to unhitch from the Old Testament just as the First Century Church unhitched from their Jewish scriptures." Stanley later clarified his point and stated people needed to hear the entirety of the 3–part series to understand what he was attempting to convey with his statement. In his sermon, Stanley failed to acknowledge the interdependency between the Old and New Testaments. As an example, throughout the Old Testament continuously references the promise of the coming Messiah. Likewise, the New Testament continuously references the fulfillment of the OT promise of the Messiah found in Jesus Christ.

See also Albert Mohler, "Getting 'Unhitched" From the Old Testament: Andy Stanley Aims at Heresy," August 10, 2018, https://albertmohler.com/2018/08/10/getting-unhitched-old-testament-andy-stanley-aims-heresy. In his blog, Mohler responds to Stanley's assertion: "At no point in the New Testament is the Old Testament dismissed. Rather, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:17–19).

[108] Mittelberg and Groothuis, "Pro and Con: The Seeker-Church Movement."

[109] Frank Turek, "The Seeker Church: Is Anyone Making Disciples?" December 20, 2007, https://www.crossexmined.org/the-seeker-church-protestant-roman-catholicism/.

[110] Ibid.

commitment. Emotionally-driven worship thrives on superficiality, momentary feelings, and

misplaced focus. As Joe Thorn states,

> The focus of worship is God, not man, which immediately pits it against
> entertainment. We offer ourselves to the Lord individually and collectively on
> Sunday morning. The church ascribes honor to God in the reading, preaching,
> singing, and praying of His Word. True worship is inherently God-centered and
> God-directed. What is done when the church is gathered is to be done according
> to God's will and for His pleasure.[111]

The entertainment style gospel appealed to many and was successful in reaching some for

the gospel, but millennials have a different view to corporate worship than their preceding

generation. As Alex McFarland and Jason Jimenez point out, millennials have an anti-corporate

mindset that values informality and they seek a family over fanfare. Instead, millennials desire a

group of friends they can call on in times of crisis not a mega-church.[112]

Syncretism: A Result of Poor Relational Discipleship and Education

Due in part to globalization, rising immigration, cultural diversity, and social media the

awareness and influence of differing philosophies, worldviews, and religious beliefs has

increased in the U.S. Although antithetical to the Christian belief structure, many of these

influences have gained a foothold in the Christian church.

> After two and half centuries of shacking up with the American dream, churches
> have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic
> individualism and religious pragmatism and are eroding our identity as the Body
> of Christ and the ability to recognize that Jesus' life of self-giving love directly
> challenges the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-actualization.[113]

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[111] Joe Thorn, "Entertainment and Worship," July 1, 2017,
https://www.ligioner.org/learn/articles/entertainment-and-worship.

[112] Alex McFarland and Jason Jimenez, *Abandon Faith* (Colorado Springs: Tyndale, 2017), 80.

[113] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 5.

Tim Clydesdale states, "After graduating high school, many emerging adults, including those engaged and affiliated with the Christian church adapted to a "semireligious" version of Christianity, a version viewed through a syncretistic lens, and most churches seem happy to leave it at that.[114]

In his dissertation, researcher Markus Colbert agrees with Clydesdale and identifies the shortcomings of the church to edify the saints (Eph. 4:12) and the influences of syncretism on emerging adults as they exit from youth ministry into adulthood.[115] Colbert theorizes that after high school graduation, as the socialization that dominates youth ministry wanes, a spiritual void occurs for many emerging adults. Influenced by secular views and the lack of spiritual maturity, sound theological education, and relational discipleship, and many emerging adults succumb to a syncretic view of Christianity. Many of these emerging adults never realize the Christianity they have adopted is antithetical to Christian orthodoxy.

Colbert attributes merging adults' exit to a disconnect between social interaction and sound theological education. In other words, once the social connection dissipated, the emerging adults found no significant reason to be connected to the church. Without self-discipline to grow spiritually, many exited the church and become influenced by what could meet their social needs. Colbert notes, "The church was not fostering a community that encouraged spiritual growth to prevent foreign doctrine from leading the emerging adults astray. The result was many emerging adults sought to grow outward socially rather than inward spiritually."[116] Furthermore, Colbert

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[114] Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 57–59,195. See also: Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 104–43. Melinda Lundquist Denton and Richard Flory, *Back-Pocket Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford, 2020), 33–56.

[115] Markus D. Colbert, "Theological Education and Spiritual Formation in the Lives of Engaged, Emerging Adults" *Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Liberty University,* September 2022, ProQuest (29398925).

[116] Ibid.

discovered as a result of no spiritual self-discipline, the lack of sound theological understanding, poor biblical instruction, and the absence of personal discipleship, many of the emerging adults that remained involved in the church beyond youth ministry were led by spiritual sensationalism outside the church.[117] "Yearning for an experimental spirituality, these emerging adults are bored with what they perceive to be the lifeless rituals of established churches and feel the need for some kind of mystical connection with God."[118] Seeking this connection and influenced by secular religious views, many emerging adults begin to adopt a syncretistic religious view based upon a sensationalized and mystical spirituality often labeled as Christianity. As the Apostle Paul cautioned Timothy, "there would come a time when people would not put up with sound doctrine … instead they would gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear, and they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3–4). MacFarland and Jimenez state, "This generation has a yearning to believe in a religion that is true. The problem is, a growing number of millennials don't know which religion that is."[119] Furthermore, because of its increasing popularity and ability to amass followings, this unorthodox view of Christianity has gained influence in the American church and is increasingly being espoused from a greater number of pulpits. Emerging adults believe that the "traditional church is a sell-out to modern consumer culture that has commodified Christianity, whereby,

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[117] Barna Research Group "State of the Bible 2021: Five Key Findings," May 19, 2021, https://www.barna,com/research/sotb-2021/. Previous Barna Research revealed a stagnation in biblical reading and interaction over an eleven-year period. However, in 2021, the research revealed a shift revealing that more Americans are open to biblical interaction in their lives with an increase in Bible reading, an increase in positive views toward the Bible, and an increase in the view that the Bible has a positive influence on society. Also see Michael McAfee and Laura McAfee, *Not What You Think: Why the Bible Might Be Nothing We Expected but Everything We Need* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019),175. Using an apologetic platform, the authors give insights into how to overcome some common misconceptions of the Bible.

[118] Reed and G, Michael Zbaraschuk, *The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion* (Oregon: Cascade, 2018):103–05.

[119] McFarland and Jimenez, *Abandon Faith*, 43.

church growth and ministry expansion that is the goal, not evangelism or the desire to go into the world to engage people in their own contexts."[120]

Deconstructing American Christianity

Is faith deconstruction a product of a syncretistic view of Christianity that is being perpetuated in the American church? Has the centrality of the gospel message been thwarted by espousal of dogmatic religious legalism devoid of grace on one hand, or by the promotion of grace devoid of a self-sacrificing life required of a disciple? Both extremes forgo the unity of grace and truth witnessed throughout the scriptures and represented in the life of Christ. The result of this disunity has produced a generation of confusion, distrust, skepticism, and ambiguity toward the religion of their upbringing. "The majority of millennials, raised in Christian homes, became dissatisfied with Christianity because of their doubts, their skepticism, and the hypocrisy they witnessed in the church."[121]

Denton and Floy note emerging adults who previously held a MTD view of God during their adolescence transition to a modified Moralistic Therapeutic Deistic view of God. Moving from an earlier view of God being merely a cosmic butler, this transitioned view holds a non-specific understanding of a customized God that represents a generalized sense of their belief or a hope in something greater than themselves in the universe. In this individualized view, God is seen as a companion they can interact with whenever they want to on their terms, that is otherwise irrelevant and neutral the majority of time in their lives.[122]

Exiting youth ministry with an underdeveloped biblical and theological foundation, many emerging adults have difficulty forming a sufficient biblically grounded orthodox *apologia* of

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[120] Reed and Zbaraschuk, *The Emerging Church,* 105.

[121] McFarland and Jimenez, *Abandon Faith*, 44.

[122] Denton and Flory, *Back-Pocket Religion*, 232–33.

their Christian faith, Thus, many unknowingly succumb to a culturalized and unorthodox religious view labeled Christianity. For many emerging adults a remote and non-concerning relationship with God is sufficient in their daily lives. However, the downfall of this superficial version of Christianity becomes unreliable during personal strife and difficulties. For some these periods of personal conflict only provide further evidence and verify their agnostic or atheistic view of God. Yet for others, this period of personal tribulation is a catalyst for self-examination; jettisoning former or existing beliefs that have infiltrated Christianity and deviated from the biblical scriptures. John Stonestreet describes this period of introspection as a period of discernment, not deconstruction, whereby a person is "untangling politics and other elements of American culture that have been corruptively bundled with Christian identity."[123]

Fellow Christian believers must be mindful that a struggling believer's announcement of faith deconstruction does not necessarily mean they are dissuading from the Christian faith. It is also not a time for ecclesiastical abandonment relegating the struggling believer to isolation. Instead, the announcement should be received as an invitation to display the love of Christ and engage with them in the spiritual reformation process. This display of love provides an atmosphere to freely discuss doubts and investigate questions together without fear of condemnation or the purveyance of spiritual hierarchy. Believers should view this announcement as an opportunity to provide discipleship and Christ-centered teaching to investigate misconceptions and correct false teachings that may have misdirected the struggling believer while both seek greater knowledge of the truth found in Jesus Christ.

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[123] John Stonestreet, "The Problem with Deconstructing Faith," *Colsen Center Breakpoint Podcast*, October 26, 2021, https://www.breakpoint.org/the-problem-with-deconstructing-faith/.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The absence of the millennial generation from Sharon Baptist Church and other area churches in and around Tyler, Texas is apparent. For reasons unknown to church leaders, many previously affiliated millennials exited the church after reaching adulthood and have failed to return. National research reveals a steady decrease in church attendance before 1980. However, it is the absence of the millennial generation, the cohort born between 1981-1996, that is profoundly noted inside the church.[1]

A decline or the absence of church attendance by emerging adults after high school graduation is not unique to millennials. Typically, this church distancing coincides with a significant life event in a young person's life. Events such as attending college, employment, or marriage, and after a period, many would eventually return to a church. As emerging adults, millennials also became absent from the church. However, unlike the preceding generations, millennials left the church and have continued to remain absent. Even more alarming is that some within this absent cohort have abandoned the spiritual beliefs of their upbringing and have professed no church or religious affiliation.

As previously noted, national research studies have revealed a multiplicity of reasons given by millennials for their church exodus and continued absence. However, no previous research has been conducted specifically around Tyler, Texas. This work has been conducted to investigate why previously affiliated millennials have exited the church of their youth and continue to remain absent. As a result of this lack of regionalized research, attempts to reach and

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[1] Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls."

reengage this absent generation by church leaders have been based on unresearched speculation only, and outreach has been largely unsuccessful in the rural church setting. For many smaller churches in America with an aging congregation, the absence of the millennial generation has church leaders alarmed and uncertain about the church's future in the rural setting.

The Local Struggle

Sharon Baptist Church (SBC) represents the typical rural church in America. Residing in Tyler, Texas, Sharon has an aging congregation struggling to find ways to reach and reengage millennials in the surrounding community. In the 1990s, Sharon Baptist Church was a thriving church in a rural community with a vibrant youth group and a weekly congregational attendance of 250–300, predominantly consisting of the silent generation and first-born baby boomers. Younger baby boomers, Gen-X generations, and their millennial generation children, occupied the children's ministry and comprised approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the congregation.

Sharon's church attendance attrition began with a generational shift; the first-born silent generation began to decrease due to illness and age. This age-driven generational shift and decreasing attendance within the baby boomers and Gen-X generations continued to become more noticeable. With the decreased familial influence and emphasis on church attendance from parental baby boomers and Gen-Xers, the slow erosion of the millennial generation's church attendance also ensued. As the socialization aspect of youth ministry dissipated with high school graduation, millennials, as emerging adults, exited the church and have not returned.

Also, during this time, the area's social and ethnic demographics began to change with the arrival of new residents in the community. These new residents may have brought lifestyles, ideologies, and world views more reflective of an ever-changing society. With no familial

history associated with the community or personal connection to the local church, these new residents felt no obligation to attend Sharon Baptist Church. While outreach was done to reach grade-school children, there were no outreach programs specifically focused to reach their parents. For the first time in the church's nearly 150-year history, it could no longer rely on the homogenous familial influence for community involvement or church attendance, and the church continues to struggle with these changes.

Over the past several years, Sharon Baptist Church's leadership has attempted to reach and reengage millennials and subsequent generations. Changes such as a more contemporary music style, casual dress, and less formal worship service were introduced. However, these changes were initiated based on speculation alone, without seeking the views and opinions of previously associated or new millennials residing in the community. Since no consultation was sought from the target audience, the changes enacted were motivated purely because the larger churches with growing attendance had previously enacted them and it was assumed by Sharon church leadership these changes would solve the absentee issue. Moreover, not only was the target audience's input never sought, the changes were never announced in the community. Therefore, millennials residing in the surrounding area never knew that the changes had been implemented in the church. It was only after realizing these changes did not produce the desired results in reaching the millennials in the community that church leaders began to realize the extent of the disconnect between the church and the community it is called to reach.

Research Intervention Design

Sharon Baptist Church is not dissimilar to many churches that continue to struggle to reengage emerging adults who left the church after reaching adulthood, and many have not returned. As previously stated, the millennials are not the first generation to leave the church

after reaching adulthood. However, millennials are the first generation not to return as they reach certain adult milestones, such as marriage and establishing a family. Moreover, not only are millennials not returning to church, but they have also become apathetic toward religious affiliation. Instead, many millennials profess to hold a syncretistic religious view, often self-identifying as Christian, while others refuse the Christian label and identify as spiritual but not religious.

This research project will endeavor to understand better why many previously church-affiliated millennials residing in and around Tyler, Texas, have exited the church after reaching adulthood and have not returned. Second, this project's results will aid in removing conjecture and speculation by church leadership as to the reasons for the millennial generation's church absence. Most importantly, the results of this project will provide church leaders with an enriched insight into the millennial's view toward the church, religious affiliation, and spiritual beliefs. These results will give church leadership greater clarity into the hearts and minds of this absent generation while gaining insight into ways of addressing the issues that have led to this generational exodus and disassociation.

Although numerous national research studies have been conducted regarding the millennial generation's church absence, no previous research has been conducted in the Tyler, Texas area. With their church exit and continued absence, many within the millennial generation cohort have rejected generational familial and sociocultural influences that have typically been associated with church attendance in the area that has historically contributed to church attendance.

In order to gain a greater sampling in identifying the reasons for millennial church absence in the Tyler, Texas area, the qualitative practice for this research project will employ an

online survey. As Sensing notes, "Qualitative research systematically seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings."[2]

By employing the qualitative research method with its ability to produce culturally specific and contextually rich data, the survey results will give greater insight into the views that previously affiliated millennials residing in the Tyler, Texas area have toward religious affiliation, church membership and what caused their disassociation. Furthermore, the aim of a survey is to obtain answers to the same questions from a greater number of individuals to compare and demonstrate that certain features exist in certain categories.[3] These results will be critical in evaluating present community outreach and the design of future engagements.[4]

<div align="center">Survey Participants</div>

The religious none cohort is comprised of agnostics, atheists, and those professing a "nothing in particular" or "spiritual but not religious" view toward religious affiliation. According to national research, forty-three percent of millennials fall into the religious none cohort, and many in this cohort previously professed a church and religious affiliation.[5]

The participants in this research study survey will comprise previously church and religiously affiliated millennials, born between 1981-1996, who exited the church after reaching adulthood and have not returned. To focus on the reasons previously church- affiliated millennials have exited the church exclusively; participants must have regularly attended an

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[2] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Thesis* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 56.

[3] Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-Time Researchers in Education and Social Services* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 116.

[4] Sensing, *Qualitative Research,* 56.

[5] Burge, "Generation Z and Religion."

Evangelical or Catholic church before the age of eighteen.[6] In this study, regular attendance is

defined as attending scheduled church services a minimum of one time per month, excluding

special events such as weddings or funerals. These attendance qualifications may reveal the

familial or social influence and the personal importance or priority of church attendance and

engagement in the participant's life prior to adulthood. Additionally, the millennial participants

must have stopped attending church after reaching the age of eighteen and, at the time of this

study, have no church or religious affiliation. This research survey will exclude professing

agnostics, atheists, and other religious beliefs due to the low percentage of representation in and

around the Tyler, Texas area.[7]

Millennials have been raised in a culture of being independent self-thinkers. This

generation is not averse to questioning the societal status quo while openly voicing their

opinions, beliefs, and views publicly. The institutionalized church is not immune to their views,

criticisms, and critiques, and the millennial generation has not been timid in conveying these

opinions publicly. The millennial generation is also known as the first generation of digital

natives; in other words, digital technologies are not something they have had to adapt to using.

Their familiarity with social media is evidence of their normative technology usage. A Pew

Research survey revealed that millennials are socially connected, with eighty-one percent

admitting to having a Facebook page and other social network platforms, and are comfortable

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[6] The National Association of Evangelicals defines a person as evangelical as: 1) A person who holds the Bible in the highest authority. 2) Encourages non-believers to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior, 3) Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of a person's sin, 4) Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's gift of eternal salvation. Church denominations considered to be historically evangelical include but are not limited to the following: Assembly of God, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Lutheran, Methodist, non-denominational, Pentecostal, Seven-Day Adventist, Presbyterian, and Reformed.

[7] Other religious beliefs such as Judaism, Islam, LDS, and non-Judeo-Christian Eastern religions represent 1.13% of the total population in the Tyler, Texas area. https://www.factsbycity.com/popular-religions/Tyer-TX/statistics.

using digital formats.[8] Unlike previous generations, the advent of social media has allowed millennials a platform to publicly express their views and opinions on a variety of topics and issues, including the church and religion and the internet has allowed an avenue to voice these views globally.

<div align="center">Survey Platform</div>

This research project will utilize the online survey platform Survey Monkey. In choosing to utilize an online survey, many factors were considered instead of in-person or telephone survey interviews. First, the online survey platform allows greater accessibility for the participants through various electronic devices. This accessibility also allows for greater convenience for the participants to access and respond to the survey at any time. The online survey platform allows the survey to reach a greater number of potential participants than an in-person or telephone interview. Second, online surveys may elicit more honest and objective answers to the survey questions by eliminating the pressure to answer questions that can be associated with in-person and telephone interviews. Next, online surveys can eliminate research bias, whereby the participant does not feel compelled to answer the question the way they believe the researcher desires. Finally, this online survey will not require any personal information and thus provides a greater sense of anonymity for the survey participant, which can elicit more open and honest answers to the survey questions.[9]

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[8] Pew Research Group, "Millennials in Adulthood, Detached from Institutions, Network with Friends," March 7, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood.

[9] "Anonymous Surveys When and How to Use Them," https://www.zoho.com.

Design Implementation: Survey Distribution

In order to reach a greater number of survey participants in the Tyler, Texas area, two avenues of solicitation were employed. First, with the millennial generation's social media usage and familiarity with digital information, Facebook was utilized to invite potential Millennial survey participants. Facebook's social network-sharing platform enabled the survey to be disseminated to other potential survey candidates through friend-sharing. The initial Facebook announcement originated from the researcher, and the announcement was refreshed on the Facebook page every three days through the fourteen-day period of the survey to ensure optimal exposure. The Facebook announcement did include an introduction and purpose of the research being conducted, and the initial parameters of eligibility requirements of the participant. Also included in the Facebook announcement was an attached hyperlink to the survey platform and included a consent agreement on the first page of the survey. The consent agreement reassured the participant's anonymity and their ability to stop the survey during the process at any time.

The second avenue of participant solicitation was a direct electronic invitation through email. To compile the email addresses of potential participants within the millennial cohort residing in the Tyler, Texas area, the congregation at Sharon Baptist Church was solicited to provide this researcher with only the email addresses of millennials they believe would be willing to participate in the survey. A written overview of the proposed research was distributed to the congregation as an insert within the Sunday morning worship bulletin. The insert was placed in the weekly Sunday bulletin and distributed to the congregation four consecutive weeks prior to survey implementation to gather as many email addresses as possible. The congregation was asked to return only the potential participant's email addresses to the researcher in written or electronic format. Upon receipt of the addresses from the church congregation, the researcher disseminated the survey invitation through an email to the potential participants. As with the

Facebook invitation, the email did include an introduction, and purpose of the research being conducted, and the initial parameters of eligibility requirements of the participant. Also included in the email announcement was an attached hyperlink to the survey platform, which included a consent agreement on the first page of the survey. The consent agreement reassured the participant's anonymity and their ability to stop the survey during the process at any time.

The Survey

Many national surveys have examined the reasons for the millennial generation's church exodus. However, no formal research has been conducted in the Tyler, Texas area to discover the reasons behind the millennial generation's church exodus after reaching adulthood and their continued absence. As the existing older congregation naturally declines due to age, for many churches, including Sharon Baptist Church, the millennial generation's continual absence has a significant impact on the long-term survivability of the church. As a result, church leaders are forced to make organizational changes, such as staff and ministry reductions affecting current church needs and community outreach.

Driven by conjecture about the religious views of millennials, Sharon Baptist Church leadership enacted various changes such as a less liturgical worship format, contemporary music, and small group ministries in an effort to attract and reengage a younger audience. However, these changes were ineffective without community engagement and relational interaction with emerging adults. Lead by the millennial church exodus, Christianity continues to decline in the U.S., and many previous religiously affiliated have joined the religious none cohort.[10] Although millennials remain absent in the Tyler area, it is unknown if the reasons for their church exodus and continued absence is consistent with the nationally published research.

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[10] Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated."

As evidenced by their continual church absence, present church evangelistic efforts in reaching and re-engaging emerging adults are ineffective. To aid Sharon Baptist and other local church leaders in identifying and understanding the influences that may have contributed to the millennial generation's church exodus and continual absence, this research project did employ a twenty-question survey of previously church-affiliated millennials residing in the Tyler, Texas area. Due to the growing attrition rate of previously church affiliates now declaring no religious affiliation, this survey focused on this cohort residing in the Tyler area.[11] The results of this survey did provide greater insight into the millennial's changed views as adults toward the church and religious affiliation and can be a tool utilized by church leaders to specifically address the issues that have led to this generational absence while evaluating present outreach ministries. Although recent data reveals an increase of religious nones in the succeeding generations, the millennial cohort initially reflected a drastic shift away from religious affiliation.[12] Due to this dramatic shift, this project's survey criteria did specifically focus on the previously church- affiliated millennial generation.

Survey Questions

The twenty-question online survey consisted of eighteen closed and two open questions. The principal objective of this survey was to examine the contributing influences that influenced millennial's views toward church affiliation, religious association, and religious teachings during their formative years and after reaching adulthood. The two open questions allowed the participants to provide further insight into the influences that affected their views personally.

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[11] Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated."

[12] Ibid.

The survey questions were designed to examine the following areas: 1) personal intrinsic and extrinsic influences that contributed to religious affiliation and church association prior to reaching adulthood, 2) personal intrinsic and extrinsic influences that did contribute to religious and church disassociation after reaching adulthood, 3) personal perspectives on religious and spiritual beliefs, 4) personal previous and present views of Christianity as a religious belief, 5) personal previous and present views of the local and global church.

As noted, this research project focused on the previously church-affiliated millennial cohort residing in the Tyler, Texas, area. To ensure the research criteria were met three initial qualifying questions were asked of participants: 1) Does the participant presently reside in or around the Tyler, Texas area? 2) Is the participant's date of birth between the years 1981-1996? 3) During childhood, did the participant predominantly attend one of the following churches: Catholic, Evangelical, or other? If the participant did not meet the initial qualifying survey criteria, they were asked not to participate, and data was not included in the final survey analysis.

Following the three qualifying questions, the next survey question was gender identification. A recent study reveals a gender shift in religious importance in America. The religious none percentage differential between men and women began to narrow within the baby boomer cohort. However, with the advent of the millennial and Gen-Z generations, women have surpassed men in the religious none category.[13] Further commenting on this trend, Sociologist Ryan Burge states, "Evangelical women have long attended church at higher rates than evangelical men. But today, that gap is narrowing, not because more men are coming but

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[13] Burge, "With Gen Z, Women Are No Longer More Religious Than Men." Prior to 1980, the religious gap was five percent. Among those born in 1980, the gap begins to narrow to about two percentage points. By 1990, the gap disappeared, and with those born in 2000 or later, women are clearly more likely to be nones than men. This decline may reveal the generational influence of religious views within the millennial generation upon succeeding generations. See also Pew Research, "The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World," March 22, 2016, https://pewresearchcenter.com. This 2014 report reveals a 13% difference in religious importance and an 8% difference in weekly church attendance of women over men in America.

because more women are leaving. Such women are increasingly likely to deconstruct their faith

or identify as religious nones."[14] The cumulative survey data by gender provided insight into

whether millennials residing in the Tyler area are representative of this latest national research of

decreased religious importance and the rise in identity as religious nones among women.

The survey questions were designed to reveal the familial, societal, church, and religious

influences during the participant's formative and adolescent years that contributed to their

current views of the church and religious affiliation as an adult. The influences considered in the

survey questions include the participant's perception of the importance of church involvement,

and the witnessed practices and the following of its teachings within the family and church

structure. As previously noted, one of the reasons many millennials give for having a negative

view of the institutionalized church is due to a witnessed hypocrisy within their family and the

church. Although this view may be specific to a particular family or church, the affected

emerging adult may generalize this view toward all believers and religious institutions.

Additionally, this survey explored the participant's views of the trustworthiness of church

leadership and the relevance of the church's biblical teachings as emerging adults navigate their

daily lives. Well-publicized scandals continue to plague the church and its leadership, and have

contributed to an increased view of skepticism and lack of confidence toward the church and

distrust of church leadership.[15] As a result of this lack of confidence and trust in the church and

its leadership, and because the biblical teachings that are being espoused are not being witnessed,

many millennials have chosen to walk away from their childhood belief, satisfied to remain in a

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[14] Pew Research, "The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World."

[15] Aaron Earls, "Pastors and Churches Face Historic Lack of Trust," Lifeway Research, July 12, 2022, https://www.lifewayresearch.com/2022/07/12/pastors-and-churches-face-historic-lack-of-trust. See also: Newport, "Why Are Americans Losing Confidence in Organized Religion?"

state of spiritual ambivalence or explore outside the Christian church for less demanding spiritual

guidance. As George Barna notes,

> Millennials are struggling to make sense of both this world and the next and
> unsure of who they can trust. They live in the crosshairs of cultural influencers
> whose extreme messages about independence and self-reliance conflict with the
> biblical themes of Christ-dependence and personal spiritual insufficiency. The
> documented growth of angst and turmoil experienced by millennials is an
> unavoidable result of denying God's existence and sovereignty. Sadly, we've set
> our young adults up for failure.[16]

Survey: Primary Objective

The primary objective of this research project, which is exclusively based on the survey

results, was to gain measurable insight into why previous church-affiliated millennials residing

in Tyler, Texas have left the church and have not returned. To accomplish this objective, the

survey results were analyzed for similarities and differences between the local responses with

data obtained from national research studies. The final two open questions allowed participants

to expound on their answers to the previous eighteen statistical questions briefly, which may give

a more personal insight into their views toward religious and church affiliation that may be

exclusive to the area surveyed.[17]

To avoid the limitations associated with a single-perspective approach to data

interpretation, this project used the theory triangulation approach to analyze the data derived

from the survey. This triangulation approach of multiple perspectives interpreting the data

provided a way to cross-check the data through multiple views, which produced greater breadth

and depth to the data interpretation of the data.[18] Sensing recommends an outsider, insider, and

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[16] Barna, "Millennials in America."

[17] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72–74.

[18] Ibid.

researcher triangulation approach in examining the research data.[19] The three perspectives this project utilize to cross-check the data included the participant's survey responses, the project's researcher, and nationally published survey results concerning millennial's views toward religious and church affiliation.

The survey did not contain a time limit. However, this self-administered twenty-question survey should take participants approximately ten minutes to complete. Upon survey completion, the results were secured within Survey Monkey. The participant sampling for this project was derived entirely from the results of this anonymous online survey questionnaire.

Survey Implementation

Four weeks before the survey implementation, the researcher delivered an announcement to the congregation at Sharon Baptist Church. The announcement included an overview of the project research and solicited the congregation's assistance in providing this researcher with only the email addresses of millennials they believed would be willing to participate in the survey (see Appendix A). A written version of the project's overview, including an area for the congregation to provide email addresses, was distributed in a Sunday worship bulletin (see Appendix B). To gather as many email addresses from the congregation as possible, the same project overview statement was placed in the Sunday worship bulletin four consecutive weeks prior to the implementation of the survey. Additionally, to reach the entire Sharon Baptist Church congregation, an email was sent through the church's email server to each church member containing the project's overview, and an electronic version of the bulletin insert requesting their assistance in soliciting email addresses of potential survey candidates were included. The congregation was asked to return the potential participant's email address in either written or

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[19] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72–74.

electronic form to the researcher. Upon receipt of the addresses from the congregation, the researcher disseminated the survey invitation through an email to the potential participants (see Appendix C).

The researcher's personal Facebook page was utilized to reach a larger population of millennials who are no longer affiliated with a church in the Tyler, Texas area or who did not have an association with a church member of Sharon Baptist Church. The Facebook post included an announcement and survey overview. The Facebook posting also included the estimated time of approximately ten minutes needed to complete the survey and reiterated that survey participation was completely anonymous. A hyperlink to the survey was embedded in the announcement page, allowing the participants to go directly to the survey residing on the Survey Monkey platform (see Appendix D). To ensure the announcement remained active on the Facebook platform, the researcher refreshed the survey announcement three times per week over the fourteen-day survey period.

The initial response from the Sharon Baptist Church congregation about the context of the research was enthusiastically received. However, in the days following the Sunday morning research announcement, there was no response from individual congregants in returning the email addresses of potential millennial survey participants. Therefore, the researcher re-sent the announcement and project overview to each member through the church's email exchange. Additionally, an instant message was sent to each church member's cell phone as a reminder of the project and the need for their assistance in gathering potential participants' email addresses. After several days the researcher received several email addresses from the congregation. The survey invitations were sent to the potential participants as the researcher received email addresses from the church congregants. As a reminder, a second follow-up survey invitation was

sent to the participant's email three days after the original invitation was delivered. The initial Facebook announcement was published on the researcher's page the same week. The Facebook posting was refreshed three times per week during the fourteen-day survey period.

The initial fourteen-day survey period did not garner the minimum number of twenty-five survey responses. Therefore, the survey participation timeframe was extended an additional thirty days. A reminder email was sent to the accumulated email addresses previously received from the church congregation, and the Facebook announcement posting was continued and refreshed every three days to ensure awareness on social media. The reminders and extended survey timeframe aided in the participant's response.

Chapter 4: Results

The goal of the research project is to identify the reasons millennials residing in the Tyler, Texas area have left the church and have not returned. The analyzed data obtained from the millennial survey performed within this project was compared with nationally published surveys to examine the convergent and divergent responses given by millennials in the Tyler, Texas area compared to national results.

This research was designed to identify the influences and reasons for the millennial generation's exodus from the church that may be unique to the Tyler, Texas area compared to nationally published survey results. Using tables and graphs will highlight the similarities and differences of the resulting survey data compared to nationally published surveys. The survey data results can be utilized by area church leadership as an informative tool to address the millennial generation's church absence may be like national results and the specific reasons associated regionally.

As previously stated, this project's survey resided on the online Survey Monkey platform. The survey announcement, overview, and a hyperlink to the survey were delivered through direct email invitations, and the survey announcement was publicized on the social-media platform Facebook by the researcher. All the survey results reside on Survey Monkey.

Analyzing the Survey Data

Sensing states that during the analysis, three analytical frames of reference will emerge from data triangulation, specifically, the insider, outsider, and researcher's frames of reference.

In comparing the three frames, areas of agreement and disagreement can emerge from the data

through comparative and contrasting responses to the survey questions. The responses can

produce areas of participant response agreements identified as themes. The responses can also

produce response disagreements, known as slippages. The survey responses can also produce

realities not covered in the survey findings.[1] To identify themes, slippages, and silences derived

from the participant's survey data, the survey questions will be categorized to reveal

commonalities and divergent survey responses. The final two open questions within the survey

may reveal individualized church and religious views not considered in the survey.

Survey Participant Demographics

A total of twenty-seven participants were engaged in the project survey. Six participants

did not meet the qualifying criteria due to not being within the millennial generation cohort. As a

result, these six participant surveys were excluded from the cumulative data analysis. Twenty-

one participants met the initial qualifying survey criteria: seven (33.3%) male and fourteen

(66.6%) female survey respondents. The previous religious affiliation stated by the qualifying

survey participants includes one Catholic (4.76%) and twenty Evangelicals (95.24%). While the

Catholic survey participation was minimum, the survey question responses generated by the

single Catholic respondent were similar to the Evangelical question responses, and thus,

supported the overall millennial view of the church apart from differing ecumenical association.

Three of the qualifying participants continued to actively attend church after reaching the

age of adulthood (age eighteen). The three responses from the survey participants who remain

associated active in a church have been included in the cumulative data analysis in relation to

questions one through ten only. These questions pertain to the influence of church attendance

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[1] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72–74.

within the family structure during the participant's childhood and church attendance after the participant reached adulthood. The remaining ten survey questions are specifically directed toward the millennial cohort not associated with the church at the time of the survey.

Survey Question Responses

Questions one through five contained in the survey specifically address survey participant demographics. The twenty-one survey participants are all within the millennial generation cohort, including seven men and fourteen women. All participants affirm previous religious affiliation prior to the age of eighteen. The previous church affiliation given by the participants includes one Catholic and twenty Evangelical associations.

To gain an understanding of the familial influence and views toward church attendance and religious affiliation that survey participants may have witnessed during their childhood and adolescence, participants were questioned if, during their childhood, regular church attendance was a priority in their household. Twelve (57.1%) of participants revealed that church attendance was a priority, while seven (33.3%) of participants stated church attendance was somewhat of a household priority, and two (9.5%) stated church attendance was not a priority in their childhood household (see fig. 1)
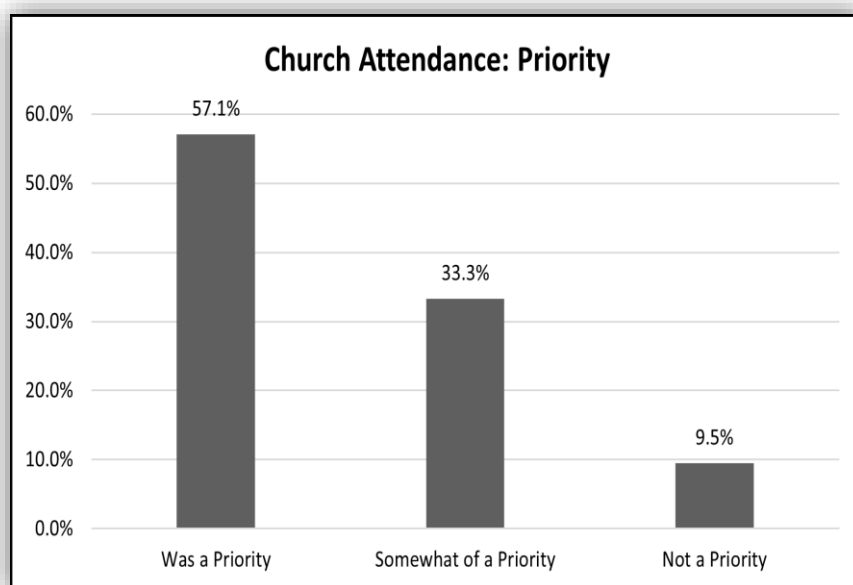
Figure 1: Church attendance priority

  Over ninety percent of survey participants stated that regular church attendance was a priority in their family structure during childhood. The high priority placed upon regular church attendance may represent a view of the church as a central tenet of society from within the surrounding community or the immediate family structure.

  To measure the stated priority of church attendance during their childhood, the survey participants were asked to estimate the number of times they attended church monthly. Supporting their church attendance priority, over eighty-five percent of survey participants stated they attended church either weekly or more than once a month, fourteen participants (66.6%) stated they attended church weekly, and four participants (19%) stated attended church more than once per month. Two participants (9.5%) indicated they attended church less than once per month, with one (4.7%) stating that although church attendance was a priority in his household, he attended church one to two times per year (see fig. 2).
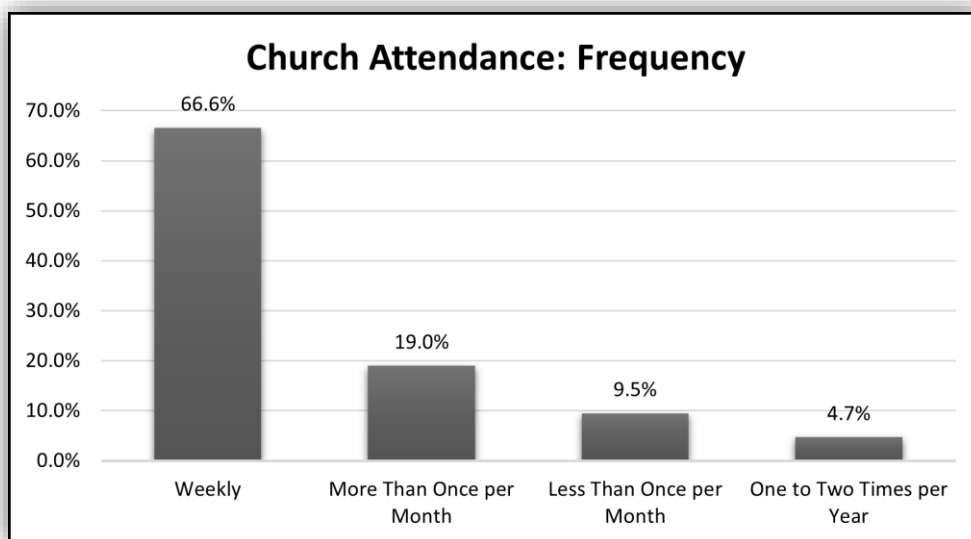
Church Attendance: Frequency

Figure 2: Tyler area attendance frequency

While church attendance cannot be a barometer for a salvific relationship that is deemed

necessary within the Christian faith, the gathering together of believers is an integral part of the

Christian faith and is not to be forsaken (Heb. 10:24–25). Among the benefits of consistent

church attendance for the believer is consistent biblical instruction and proper edification, which

is foundational for spiritual growth and maturity. Moreover, consistent church attendance is

essential for communal fellowship with other believers and building relationships through

togetherness with other believers.

It appears from the previous responses that among most survey participants, a priority

was placed upon regular and consistent church attendance during their childhood. When asked

what most influenced their church attendance during childhood and adolescence, fifteen survey

participants (71.4%) stated that their parents or family was the impetus for their church

attendance. Four survey participants (19%) noted that social interaction with their peers was the

primary reason for church attendance, and two participants (9.5%) stated that the primary reason

a strong desire to worship God and learn more about the Bible was the reason for attending (see fig. 3).

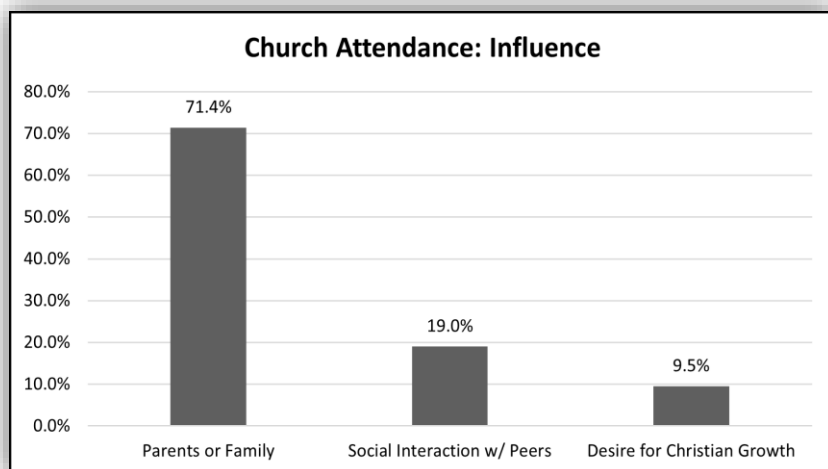**Church Attendance: Influence**

Figure 3: Tyler area attendance influence

The survey responses to this question assert a high degree of familial influence related to church attendance among survey participants, with over seventy percent of respondents affirming this decision was guided by parental or family influence during childhood and adolescence. However, as emerging adults now independent from familial influence, millennials may not convey the same degree of importance toward church attendance or religious affiliation as transposed upon them by their parents at an early age.

The understanding is that during their formative years, many millennials reflect the religious views transposed upon them from within their family structure, and these views toward the church and religious association can have a generational impact. To better understand this impact, participants were asked to reflect on their church attendance and religious association as a positive or negative influence during their formative years. Thirteen (61%) survey participants indicated that the church positively or very positively influenced their life. Conversely, six

(28.5%) survey participants stated that the church negatively influenced their lives, and two (9.5%) participants stated that the church had no real influence.

Most survey participants stated that church attendance and religious association positively influenced their lives. However, the combined thirty-eight percent of survey respondents noted that the church had a negative or no real influence in their lives is significant. This statement reveals that even while attending church routinely, many late-teen millennials had spiritually, emotionally, and relationally detached from the church before physically leaving as emerging adults. For many emerging adults, this premeditated church exodus is evidenced by the slow withdrawal from regular church attendance during the latter portion of the teenage years to the dramatic shift of complete church separation after reaching eighteen. According to the survey, eighteen participants (85.71%) did not regularly attend church after age eighteen, including many of the survey participants who previously stated that the church positively influenced their life. Only three (14.29%) survey participants attended church regularly as emerging adults.

Declining attendance and separation from church association is not a new phenomenon exclusive to the emerging adults within the millennial generation cohort. This separation usually coincides as the emerging adult experiences life-altering events. As independence from familial influence is gained and replaced by self-governing for many, church attendance and religious association become less of a priority. Historically, after a period of time, many of them eventually return. This return is usually synonymous with significant life events such as marriage, family formation, or job placement. Still others return when sudden tragedy occurs, seeking solace within the church's communal aspect. While these life experiences may have

prompted a return to church among preceding generations, church reengagement has not occurred for an increasing number of millennials, including this project's respondents.

While sixty-one percent of the survey respondents viewed the church's influence as positive or very positive during their formative years, their view of the church changed after reaching adulthood. Twelve (66.6%) of the survey participants no longer viewed the church positively, while six (33.3%) stated their views had not changed.

The survey participants' changed view toward the church may represent an independent personal view toward the church that no longer adheres to a familial homogenous view. Prior church attendance and religious affiliation may have been under behest during childhood and adolescence, and as an emerging adult, respondents may no longer feel under such obligation. Furthermore, these newly expressed views toward the church and religious association may be a desire to separate from the influences of previous religious experiences and dogmatic teachings while attempting to reconcile these influences to formulate a personal religious view within a society that may be antithetical or hostile toward such views.

While most of the survey participants stated they consistently attended church (90.4%) and the church positively influenced their lives (61%), these early church experiences were not enough to deter a church exit as emerging adults. Additionally, among the survey participants, this church exodus changed their view of the church as adults. Over sixty-six percent (66.6%) of survey participants stated their views of the church have become more negative since reaching adulthood, while six survey participants (33.3%) stated their view of the church had become more positive as emerging adults but remain absent from the church.

The survey question does not expound on the contributing factors for the changed views given by the respondents towards the church and religious affiliation. Most of the survey

participants have a negative view of the church, and all the survey respondents remaining absent

indicate that church attendance and religious affiliation at this juncture is not a significant

priority. Revealing further disconnect, almost thirty-nine percent (38.8%) of the participants

stated that the church is no longer personally relevant and is not a significant need in their daily

lives. Additionally, over forty-four percent (44.4%) of participants feel more spiritually

connected to God without attending church or being religiously affiliated. These survey

participants desire to maintain a relationship with God apart from the institution of the church

and are consistent with a spiritual but not religious cohort.

Although all the survey respondents indicate they remain absent from the church, thirty-

three percent state they feel more connected to God when they attend a church with other

believers, and sixteen percent claim church membership is essential, and the church remains a

central part of their lives. While these survey participants may not be active church attenders,

their responses indicate the importance of church attendance and association in their lives and,

thus, a possibility of their return. Early studies by church leaders and sociologists discovered that

within the millennial cohort existed a rising sense of indifference to personal faith, increased

skepticism toward the church and its leadership, and a view by many millennials of the church as

irrelevant in their personal lives and within society. For many, religious affiliation was not a

source of personal identity, nor was church attendance a personal priority.[2] The participant

responses to this survey reflect this consensus among previously church-affiliated millennials

residing around Tyler, Texas. Among the eighteen survey participants, a total of twenty-six

responses were given. Seven (38.8%) of the eighteen respondents state that, in their view, the

church has become irrelevant, and the church is out of touch with today's society. Likewise,

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[2] Barna, "New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence: Millennials in America."

eight (44.4%) also view the church with skepticism. Conversely, eight survey respondents

(44.4%) feel the church continues to be relevant and important in today's society. However, even

though eight survey respondents view the church as relevant in society, only three (16.6%) of the

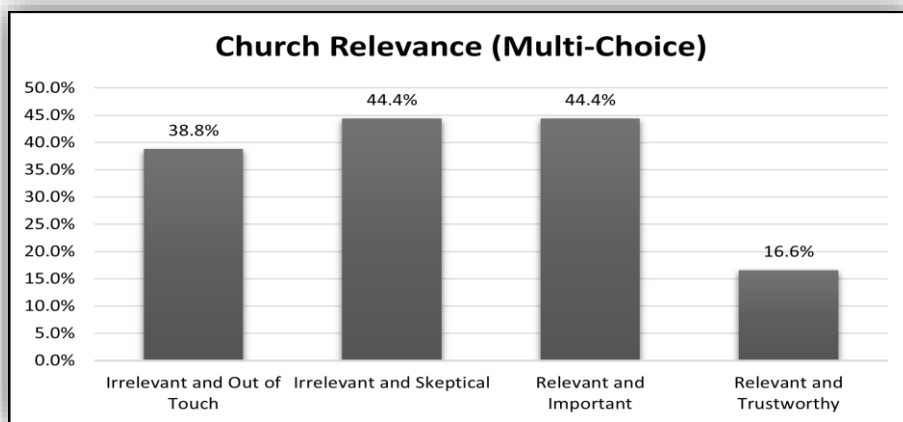participants view the church as trustworthy (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Tyler area church relevance

Once considered essential in communal integration and a form of familial and personal

identity, church association was an intricate and relevant part of daily life. For many

parishioners, the church's doctrinal beliefs and teachings were foundational and guided almost

every aspect of their daily life. Today, as the survey participants reveal, millennials have

distanced themselves from the church, refusing to be confined to a particular belief structure they

view as outdated and irrelevant in a postmodern society.

For many emerging adults, one of the earliest conflicts that arise as they establish a

personal worldview is between biblical teachings they receive during their childhood and youth

juxtaposed against the postmodern influences that dominate society and are increasingly

espoused in academia. These conflicting worldviews can create doubt and questions about

biblical teachings concerning personal worldview development.

When survey participants were asked about a central Christian doctrine of only one way to God as the Christian faith professes, seven (38.8%) of the eighteen participants affirmed this doctrinal belief and viewed the biblical teachings as a guide in their personal lives. However, when participants were asked if they felt that Christian biblical teachings were relevant in today's culture, only three (16.6%) stated they believed these teachings remained relevant. Furthermore, seven (38.8%) participants viewed Christian biblical teachings as outdated and irrelevant in today's culture. Four (22.2%) participants felt that all religious beliefs could lead to God and viewed them as a guide for daily life.

The survey participant's responses to this question reveal the overwhelming influence of a dominant postmodernism philosophy within society that is increasingly espoused in academia and subtly infiltrating the Christian church in many ways. This postmodern influence is evidenced by the responses given. While seven survey participants affirm the exclusive Christian doctrinal claim of one way to God, only three (16.6%) of the eighteen participants stated this claim remains relevant. Conversely, fifteen (83.4%) survey participants view this doctrinal position as outdated and irrelevant in today's culture, with four participants supporting the claim that all religious beliefs allow access to God.

While many believe that holding an all-inclusive postmodern philosophy is generally harmless, this view erodes the Christian faith's foundational premise and biblical teachings. The participant responses also reveal the crucial importance of biblical instruction, especially during adolescence, as the soon-to-be adult is confronted with an idealism that conflicts with the Christian faith.

Many millennials view the church as an antiquated institution more prone to ecclesiastical traditionalism than delivering a relevant message applicable to their daily lives. To

see if this view is consistent in the Tyler, Texas area, survey respondents were asked if they preferred a traditional style of worship service, which included a monologue method of teaching, or a non-traditional style of worship service, which included a conversational teaching method. A total of nineteen responses were given, with all participants preferring a non-traditional style of worship, including a conversational teaching method. One participant preferred both the traditional and non-traditional worship service.

One of the complaints millennials posed against the church is the relevance of biblical teaching and its application as they attempt to navigate within a world that has become increasingly antagonistic toward the Christian faith. The overwhelming response by the survey participants preferring a conversational teaching style reveals this generation's frustration with the historically prevalent monologue teaching. The monologue presentation can limit conversational dialogue, which may hinder understanding and personal application of the biblical text.

The reasons for millennials exiting the church and remaining absent vary by individual. Survey participants were asked to give their top three reasons for leaving to understand why previously church-affiliated millennials residing in Tyler have exited the church and remain absent. A total of sixteen participants responded to this question. Eight respondents listed hypocrisy as one of the reasons for their church exodus. Seven respondents felt the church was too judgmental. Six participants view the teachings by the church as hypocritical, and church leaders use the biblical text in a coercive and controlling manner. Four (25%) survey participants felt uncomfortable and unwelcome when they attempted to return and ultimately stopped attending (see fig. 5).
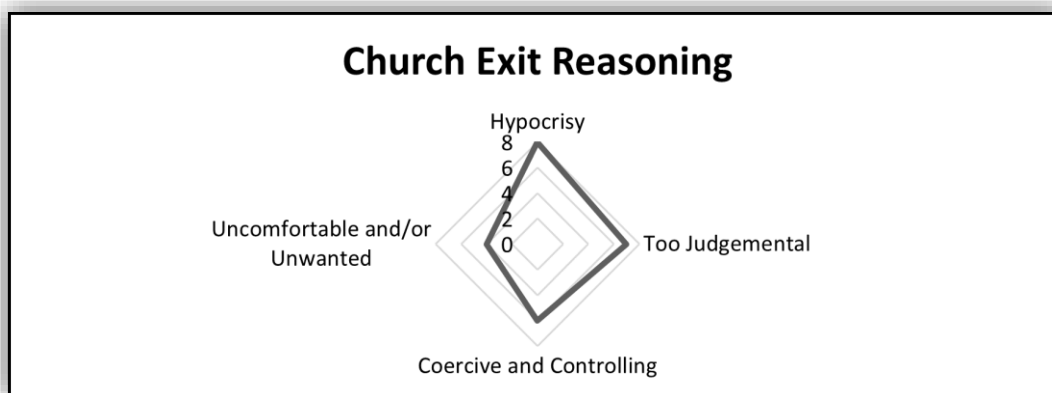
Figure 5: Tyler area exit reasoning

Hypocrisy and judgmentalism by the church are given by millennials in Tyler, Texas, as the leading reasons for their church exodus and continued absence. Specifically, six survey participants associated hypocrisy with the teaching of the biblical text being manipulated by church leadership in a controlling manner. Hypocrisy and judgementalism have plagued the church since its inception, and both are detrimental to the proclamation of the gospel and firmly denounced throughout Scripture (Isa. 29:13; Luke 18:7–14; Matt. 7:15, 15:8–9, 23:27; Rom. 12:9). Unfortunately, having previously been associated with the church, many of the survey respondents have personally witnessed this sinful nature and have transposed these actions on Christianity and the church universally.

For many millennials who have spent their childhood and adolescent years within the church community to consider leaving can be an emotional and difficult decision. To understand this emotional struggle and reveal the aspects of church affiliation millennials deem the most difficult to leave behind, survey participants were asked what they missed most by not being associated with a church or a religious organization.

Sixteen survey participants responded to this question, and twelve (75%) of the survey participants stated that some aspects they missed the most about church affiliation after leaving the church were fellowship, community, and friendships within the church body. Five survey participants (31%) stated that they were missing the biblical learning aspect of the church, while one respondent specifically stated missing the role modeling, mentorship, and guidance that the church provided.

Having spent a substantial part of their childhood and adolescence in a community with the church, many previously affiliated respondents report a sense of loss with their eventual separation from the church. Furthermore, the central theme noted throughout the responses to this question is that the aspect most missed after leaving the church is the absence of relationships, including the thirty-one percent given to biblical learning. millennials miss the relational and communal aspect of church association, and many have turned elsewhere to fulfill this need.

The spiritual but not religious cohort continues to rise in the U.S. Many SBNR millennials believe in God and may continue to identify as Christian but choose not to be labeled with a particular church affiliation.[3] To identify if the spiritual but not religious view is prevalent in the Tyler, Texas area survey participants were asked if they considered themselves spiritual but not religious and had the desire to have or maintain a relationship with God but did not desire affiliation with a church or religious organization. Thirteen (72.2%) of the participants stated they considered themselves spiritual but not religious, while five (27.78%) did not identify as spiritual but not religious.

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[3] Pew Research, "In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace."

The high percentage of survey participants identifying as spiritual but not religious in the Tyler, Texas area may reflect the increasing influence of postmodernism. For other previously religious-affiliated survey participants, this spiritual but not religious is a declaration of maintaining a belief in God while safeguarding themselves from previous experiences within the institution of the church or strong familiar religious influences.

Separating from the church as an emerging adult is not a unique event exclusive to millennials. Previous generations also left the church after reaching adulthood; however, they eventually returned to religious affiliation sometime during their early adulthood. This return was usually associated with milestone events such as marriage, children, job placement, and other events. The first-born millennials have approached forty years of age, and many of these same milestone events have occurred within this generational cohort, but many millennials remain absent from the church.[4]

To see if the millennials around Tyler reflect the national trend of remaining absent from church, the survey participants were asked how likely they would return to a church in the future. At the time of this project's survey, all eighteen participants were not attending church, and thirteen participants (72%) described their religious views as spiritual but not religious. Even though the survey reflects a high percentage of SBNR participants, thirteen of the survey participants (72%) also stated there was a high probability or a possibility of their eventual return to the church in the future. Six participants stated they would not return to church.

Although the SBNR view is prevalent among the survey participants, almost thirteen percent (12.9%) stated a high probability of returning to church in the future. This changed view toward church attendance and religious association may reflect a dissatisfaction with the

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[4] "The State of Church Attendance: Trends and Statistics [2023]," Churchtrac, https://www.churchtrac.com/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023 See also Barna Research Group, "A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance

religious autonomy that is appealing to many in postmodernism. Second, up to this point, unlike previous generations, millennials have not associated a return to church with personal life events such as establishing a family. The desire to return may be due to a delay in these significant life events. Furthermore, having been previously affiliated, millennials possessing a greater understanding of the need for relationships may desire to return to the communal environment of the church that was experienced during their childhood and adolescence.

Local and National Survey Comparisons

A recent Gallup Research report gives insight into the effects of church and religious disconnect between generations and the effects of childhood church attendance as an adult. The report stated, "More than a third of Americans have fallen away from attending religious services regularly in their lifetime, as thirty-one percent report attending church, synagogue, mosque, or temple weekly or near weekly today, whereas sixty-seven percent say they attended church frequently growing up."[5] Furthermore, the poll reveals as adults thirty-eight percent attend church today that grew up in households that attended church weekly or bi-weekly during their youth compared to twenty-three percent that regularly attended (one-two times per month) as children, and sixteen percent for those whom seldom or never attended as children (see fig. 6).[6]

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[5] Jones, "In U.S. Childhood Churchgoing Habits Fade in Adulthood."

[6] Ibid.

As far as you know, how often did your parents attend church, synagogue, mosque or temple when they were growing up?

■ % Every week   ■ % Almost every week   ■ % About once a month   ■ % Seldom
■ % Never

Now

| 22 | 9 | 10 | 25 | 33 | |

When growing up

| 50 | 17 | 10 | 15 | 8 |

Parents, when they were growing up

| 51 | 16 | 9 | 14 | 7 |

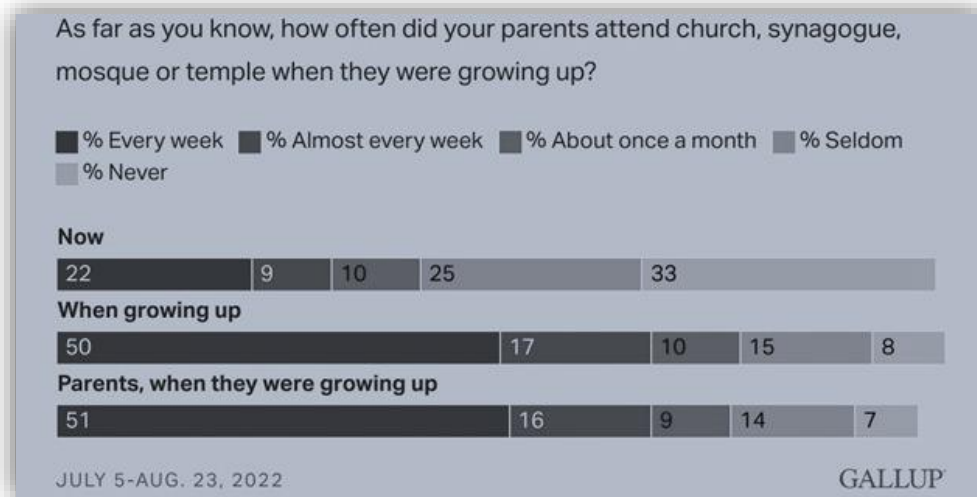JULY 5-AUG. 23, 2022   GALLUP

Figure 6: Attendance survey; Gallup News Report, December 2022

The Gallup poll does not explicitly ask the survey participants about the familial priority or influence concerning church attendance and frequency during childhood and adolescence. However, the familial influence may be witnessed when the parental attendance categories are consolidated. Together, the weekly, bi-weekly, and frequent categories represent seventy-six percent parental church attendance of one time per month or greater. When the same categories are combined, the significance of church attendance priority and familial influence is witnessed, with ninety-eight percent of the Gallup respondents stating they attended church during their childhood and adolescence once per month or more.

In this project's survey, the church attendance priority is specifically addressed, with over ninety percent of respondents stating that church attendance was a priority or somewhat of a priority during their childhood and adolescence. As with the Gallup report, the familial influence is significant, with over seventy-one percent of the area survey respondents stating parental influence was the predominant reason for regular church attendance. The parental influence

resulted in eighty-five percent of the Tyler area millennials stating they attended church weekly

or more than once per month during their childhood and adolescence (see fig. 7).
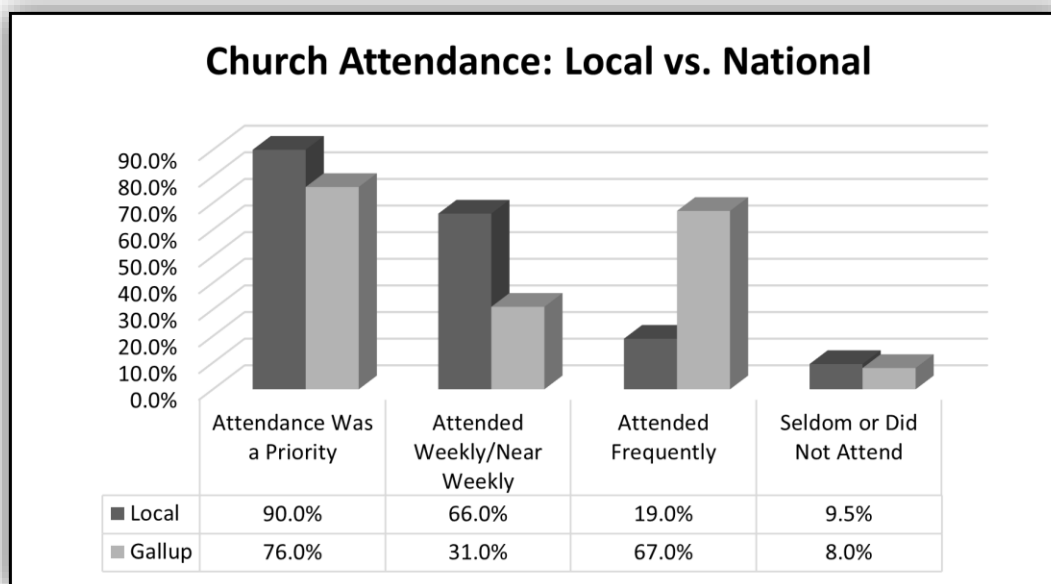

Figure 7: Gallup Poll vs. Tyler church attendance comparison

   Both the Gallup poll and the responses within this project assert a high degree of familial

homogenous and relational influence related to church attendance and association among

millennials, and both surveys reveal that teens attend religious services about as often as their

parents.[7] However, the familial influence and religious cohesiveness appear to dissipate when

teens become emerging adults and leave home. Although teens may identify religiously and

attend church as often as their parents, surveys reveal religion is less important in their lives as

compared to their parents.[8] This may be a result of parents asserting less importance on their

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[7] Pew Research Center, "U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals," September 10, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/09/10/u-s-teens-take-after-their-parents-religiously-attend-services-together-and-enjoy-family-rituals.

[8] Ibid. Pew Research survey reports a dramatic decrease in religion and personal importance. Forty-three percent of parents view religion as personally important as compared to twenty-four percent of teens.

children while growing up of having the same religious and political beliefs like their own. Only thirty-five percent of parents say it is extremely or very important to them that their children share their religious beliefs.[9] While the parental influence on church attendance and religious affiliation may remain high during childhood and early adolescence, research reveals a church attendance decline within the final two years of high school that continues into young adulthood.[10]

The millennial church exit is substantial at the age of eighteen. However, a 2017 Lifeway survey reports that church attendance erosion accelerates beyond eighteen for many emerging adults. The report finds that at eighteen sixty-six percent of respondents stated they stopped attending church for at least a year between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Additionally, defining regular church attendance as attending two times per month or greater, the Lifeway report reveals that at the age of seventeen, sixty-nine percent of the respondents attended church regularly, but by the age of twenty-two, the regular church attendance percentage dropped to thirty-three percent.[11]

While this project's survey does not identify the specific age participants exited the church beyond the age of eighteen, it does reveal a greater percentage of area participants no longer attending church, with almost eighty-six percent (85.7%) of respondents stating they no longer attend church. This higher percentage may result from this project's survey being non-specific to the respondent's church exit timeframe beyond eighteen. Additionally, while not

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[9] Rachel Minkin & Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Parenting in America Today," Pew Research Center, January 24, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/parenting-in-america.

[10] Pew Research Center, "U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals."

[11] Aaron Earls, "Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go Between the Ages 18–22," Lifeway Research, January 2015, https://www.research.lifeway.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/.

addressed in this project's survey as a reason for millennials' continued absence, recent national studies reveal the lingering effect of the recent COVID-19 restrictions placed upon mass gatherings that many churches followed as a potential contributing factor for the continued decrease in church attendance.[12]

National studies reveal the degressive view of the importance and personal relevance of church attendance and religious association. Once held as a central theme of personal importance and identification, religious association and church attendance for an increasing number of emerging adults, including millennials, is no longer personally relevant.

Eighteen survey participants gave twenty-six responses to the question of church relevance. Seven (38.8%) of survey participants stated that, in their view, the church had become irrelevant due to being out of touch with today's society. Eight survey participants (44.4%) also viewed the church as irrelevant with skepticism. Conversely, eight (44.4%) respondents view the church as relevant in society, and three (16.6%) view the church as trustworthy. The responses given by area millennials reflect the national views of the church. While giving various reasons to support their view, a 2018 Pew Research report reveals that thirty-seven percent of the survey respondents view the church as personally irrelevant in their daily lives, while forty-one percent of the respondents stated the church was important or very important in their lives.[13]

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[12] Lindsey Witt-Swanson, Jennifer Benz & Daniel A. Cox, Faith After the Pandemic: How COVID-19 Changed American Religion," *Survey Center for American Life,* January 5, 2023, https://americansurveycenter.org/research/faith-after-the-pandemic-how-covid-19–changed-american-religion. See also "Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations," *Hartford Institute for Religious Research,* www.covidreligionresearch.org/news. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time."

[13] Pew Research Center, "Why American 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion." Also see Barna, "Millennials in America."

Church Relevance: Local vs. National

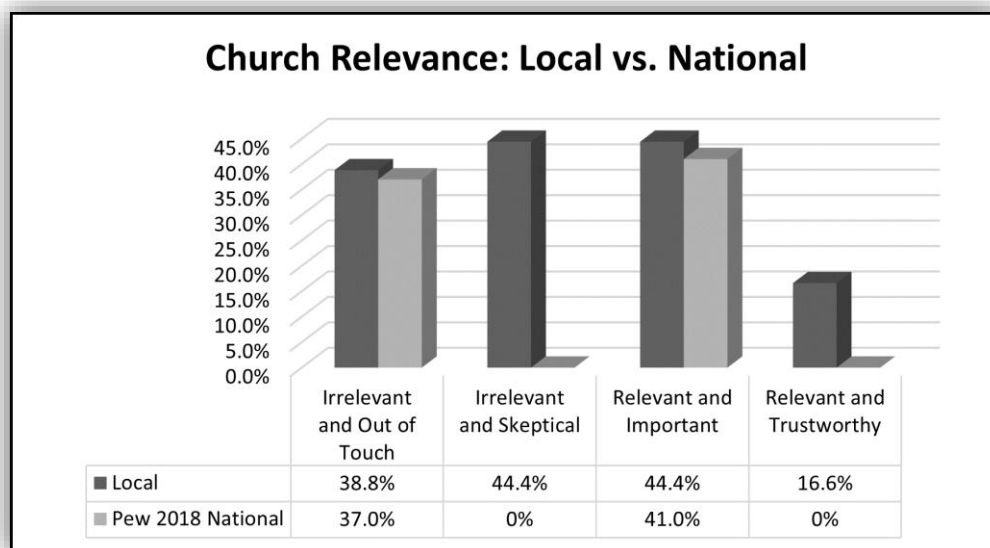|	Irrelevant and Out of Touch	Irrelevant and Skeptical	Relevant and Important	Relevant and Trustworthy
Local	38.8%	44.4%	44.4%	16.6%
Pew 2018 National	37.0%	0%	41.0%	0%

Figure 8: Pew Research vs. Tyler area church relevance

The influence of postmodernism and religious syncretism is apparent in the responses received from the survey participants concerning essential Christian doctrines and biblical teachings. Eighteen survey participants responded to questions concerning the personal relevance of Christian doctrines and biblical teachings. Seven participants (38.8%) affirmed the doctrinal belief of only one way to God, as the Bible attests. However, only three participants (16.6%) stated that biblical teachings remained relevant, with four participants (22.2%) stating that all religious beliefs can lead to God and view them as a guide for their daily lives. Fifteen participants (83.4%) view the exclusive claim held within the Christian faith as outdated and irrelevant in today's culture. The views expressed by millennials residing in the Tyler, Texas area reflect national surveys. A study by the Family Research Council revealed that among the survey participants, seventy-four percent believe that all religious faiths have equal value. While fifty-six percent of participants reject the belief in absolute moral truth. Furthermore, only

sixteen percent of participants affirm the belief that they will spend eternity with God through the forgiveness of sins and the acceptance of Christ.[14]

As national studies continue to report, church attendance in America continues to decline rapidly. The acceleration of this decline became most apparent within the millennial generation, and in 2021, for the first time, church attendance fell below fifty percent in the U.S.(Fig.9).[15]

Church Membership Among U.S. Adults Now Below 50%
Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue or mosque?

— % Yes, member

73   76   73   73   71   71   68   69   70   64   61   57   55   50   47

1940 1945 1950 1955 1960 1965 1970 1975 1980 1985 1990 1995 2000 2005 2010 2015 2020

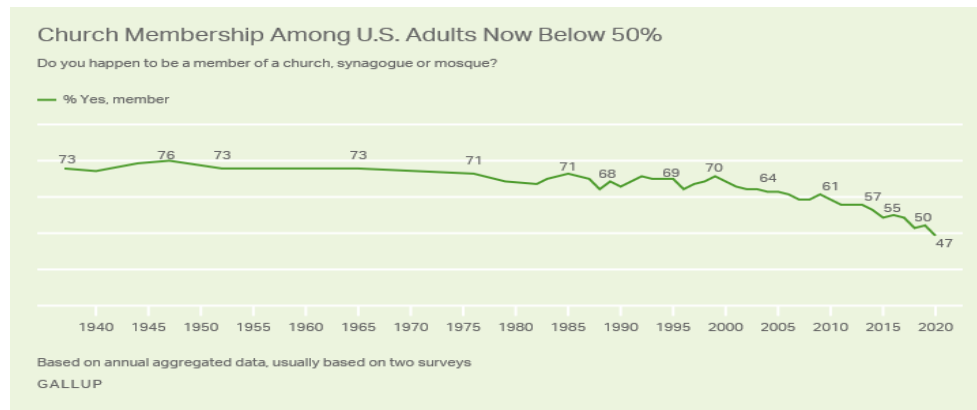Based on annual aggregated data, usually based on two surveys
GALLUP

Figure 9: Church membership, 2021 Gallup News

In 2015, Barna Group released a comprehensive survey citing why church attendance continues declining, especially among millennials. This list by millennials includes moral failures of church leadership (35%), personal irrelevance and not important (65%), and hypocrisy (66%). Millennials also view the church as judgmental (87%), intolerant of other beliefs (46%) and insensitive to others (70%). Millennials also feel that God is missing in the church, and the church is a place where legitimate doubt is prohibited and criticized. Furthermore, millennials

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[14] George Barna, "Understanding Millennials and Loving Them into the Kingdom of God," Family Research Council, May 11, 2022, https://www.frc.org/blog/2022/05/understanding-millennials-and-love-them-kingdom-god/.

[15] Jeffery M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority For First Time."

state that biblical teaching within the church is without personal application, and many feel

unwelcomed and have no sense of community within the church.[16]

The reasons given for their church exit by millennials in and around Tyler, Texas is like

those given by millennials in national surveys. Area millennials list hypocrisy (50%) and

judgmentalism (43%) witnessed in the church as two leading reasons for their exit. Thirty-seven

percent of the area survey respondents state that church leadership uses the biblical teachings

coercively and controllingly. While twenty-five percent stated that when an initial attempt was

made to return to the church, they felt uncomfortable and ultimately stopped attending.

Declining Church Attendance Reasoning: Local vs. National

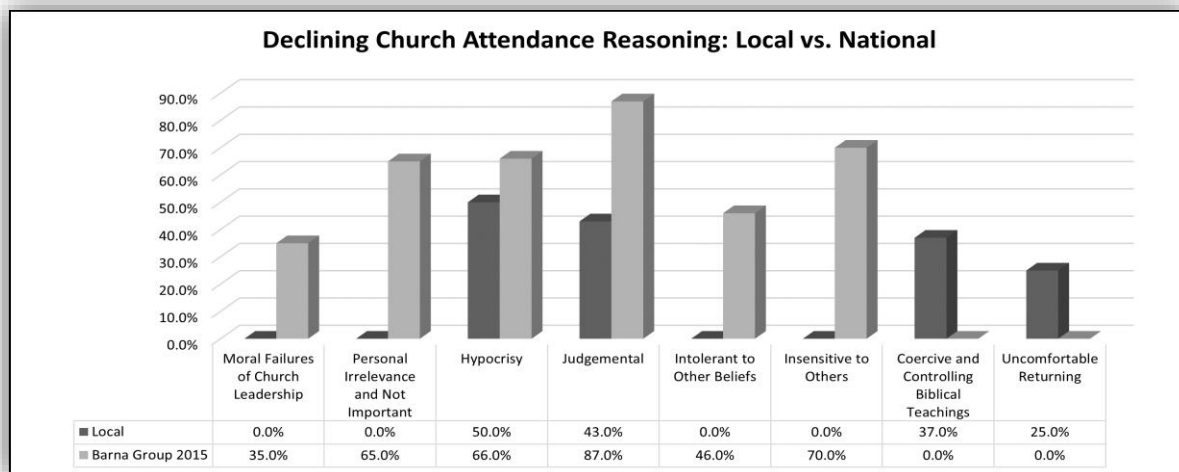|	Moral Failures of Church Leadership	Personal Irrelevance and Not Important	Hypocrisy	Judgemental	Intolerant to Other Beliefs	Insensitive to Others	Coercive and Controlling Biblical Teachings	Uncomfortable Returning
Local	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	43.0%	0.0%	0.0%	37.0%	25.0%
Barna Group 2015	35.0%	65.0%	66.0%	87.0%	46.0%	70.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Figure 10: Declining church attendance reasoning, national vs. Tyler area

Pew Research reports that about three-in-ten U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated and

self-identifying Christians make up 63% of the U.S. population in 2021, down from 75% in ten

years. Additionally, one-in-five U.S. adults (20%) now describe their religion as 'nothing in

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[16] Barna Research Group, "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," March 4, 2015, https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/. Also see Earls, "Church Dropouts.".

particular' up from fourteen percent in ten years.[17] According to a 2022 report from Survey Center on American Life, twenty-nine percent of millennials identify as being spiritual but not religious. Furthermore, seventy-one percent of the SBNR participants reported being raised in a religious tradition.[18]

The responses from millennials in the Tyler, Texas area reflect a higher percentage than national surveys. Thirteen of the eighteen (72%) of the previously affiliated survey participants in the Tyler area state they are no longer affiliated with a particular religion and consider themselves spiritual but not religious.

Surveyed millennials, nationally and locally, listed hypocrisy and judgementalism as two reasons for their church separation. However, while nationally surveyed millennials listed moral failures of church leadership, intolerance, and insensitivity toward other religious beliefs as leading causes for their absence, the Tyler area millennials listed different reasons for their church exit.

Along with hypocrisy and judgementalism, thirty-seven percent of millennials in the Tyler area felt that church leadership used the biblical text in a coercive and controlling manner. Additionally, twenty-five percent stated they felt uncomfortable and unwelcome when they return to church. While the surveyed millennials did not elaborate on these reasons, their view of the biblical text being used by church leadership in a coercive and controlling manner may be the result of a personal internal conflict between the adoption of a postmodern worldview that perpetuates religious tolerance and moral relativism that is antithetical to the Christian worldview. Furthermore, the emotions associated with these conflicting worldviews may be

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[17] Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated."

[18] Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America."

further heightened within the returning millennial by a feeling of uncomfortableness and a sense of being unwelcomed by the church when returning.

Survey Summary

The impetus of this project's survey was to examine the reasons why Sharon Baptist Church and other churches in the Tyler, Texas area continue to witness the absence of the millennial generation in their congregations. For many area churches, this continued generational absence has created organizational instability and has church leaders perplexed in how to reach this disconnected generation.

As the survey reveals, in over ninety percent of the households in the Tyler aera, church attendance and religious affiliation were prioritized during childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, sixty-one percent of survey participants stated that the church positively influenced their lives. However, as the familial influence subsides in the late teenage years, as emerging adults, there is a significant shift away from regular church attendance and religious affiliation, while also viewing church as a negative influence on their lives and society. With an eighty-five percent church exit rate among area survey participants, millennials in the Tyler area exceed the national church exit rate.

This project's survey does not specifically address the influence of relativism and postmodernism. However, the results of this culturally promoted philosophy are revealed within the responses generated by area millennials. While the survey participants do not explicitly reference religious deconstruction, many of the responses do reveal various aspects of religious deconstruction and MTD, such as the questioning and denial of some of the central Christian doctrinal teachings and its relevance within today's society. Eighty-three percent of participants deny the exclusive claim within Christianity, while upholding a pluralistic view of all religions

leading to God. Additionally, a strong postmodern influence is revealed when seventy-two percent of respondents affirm their religious view as spiritual but not religious.

Overall, the survey responses reveal a dramatic shift away from the centrality of church attendance and religious affiliation witnessed during the participant's childhood and adolescence. While the survey participants may have experienced strong familial, religious influence where church attendance and affiliation were designated a priority and expected, this view was not sustained as millennials became emerging adults.

The survey statistics are disturbing, and the cultural influence is apparent among Tyler area millennials, however, all is not lost. Citing the absence of communal association in their lives, and the desire for relational mentoring (discipleship), seventy-two percent of the survey participants stated there is a high probability or possibility of their eventual return to church in the future. Area millennials are willing to give the church another chance and have announced it is the establishment of relationships as the roadmap for successful re-engagement.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Nationally published surveys reveal various reasons for the millennial generation's separation from the institution of the church and their public proclamation of spirituality without specific religious affiliation. Many church leaders across the U.S. use these publications to identify and evaluate potential trends that may influence their local congregations. While these publications provide insightful information on trending issues, they may not fully reflect the views or perspectives on the same topics within a regionalized or local area.

The millennial generation's church exodus has profoundly changed the religious landscape across America. This generational absence has been the subject of numerous discussions, surveys, articles, and books investigating the reasons for this generational move away from church attendance and religious association. Meanwhile, the consequences of the empty pews have been devastating for many churches. For smaller churches, such as Sharon Baptist Church, this continual generational absence has exacerbated existing struggles to remain open in the community.

The impetus for this project was to collect and identify the specific reasons why millennials residing in the Tyler, Texas area exited the church after reaching adulthood and to examine these localized reasons for church exodus against national results to discover similarities and unique reasons. Focusing on the localized survey results allows church leaders to address areas of concern specific in the Tyler region.

Survey Changes

Attempting a religious conversation with a stranger can be awkward and uncomfortable. While some millennials may be willing to discuss their religious viewpoints publicly, others view their religious positions as a private subject matter and are unwilling to discuss their views openly. In order to minimize this reluctance, an anonymous online survey method was chosen as the preferred method in this project. This chosen method would allow participants to express their religious views, and having the survey online also provided greater convenience for the participants. However, this convenience may have allowed for an insouciant view of the survey. In general, this unconcerned view led to an overall poor response to the survey invitation by millennials. While anonymity is a strong positive for the use of online surveys, without encouragement, participation is hindered. While in many cases, a single survey method may be preferred, in this study a multifaceted survey approach of combining several survey methods such, as telephone or in-person interviews in conjunction with the online survey, may have produced greater participant results.

A vibrant children and youth ministry can be a leading indicator of the church's integration within the surrounding community. For most churches, a central focus and continual effort of community outreach is placed upon providing various events, programs, and other social events to reach the entire family through the children. For families searching for a church home, robust children and youth ministries can be the deciding factor in joining a church.

While these ministries are vital to both the church and the searching families, many churches struggle to find appropriately trained children and youth leaders. This struggle can lead to filling a needed teaching position with a volunteer without adequately investigating the person's biblical understanding and spiritual maturity, which should include their religious and doctrinal views that may or may not conform to a Christian worldview perspective.

Filling a teaching position without proper investigation can lead to unorthodox biblical teaching and misguided worldviews that may conflict with the Christian worldview. This misguidance may be a contributing factor in the high rate of church and religious disengagement among emerging adults who may find ease of the acceptance of a postmodern worldview due to unorthodox teachings labeled as Christianity during their youth.

While this research project does not investigate the level of training or education within the youth ministry programs, further study is needed to investigate the possible connection between the inadequate training and education of church youth leaders and teachers as a potential contributing factor to the high church exit rate and the acceptance of non-Christian worldviews among emerging adults as they leave the youth ministry.

Another limitation of this survey was the survey-imposed age limit of the participants to eighteen at the time of church separation. While this age designation gives a defined delineation of church separation of the participant in the survey, it did not consider other contributing factors, such as spiritual and emotional separation that may have occurred before the physical church separation at eighteen. Since all the survey participants attended church before eighteen, using an age-range question would give greater insight into changing views while the survey participant is still attending church. This question would reveal that the decision to leave the church may be a progressive event that could be addressed long before the millennial leaves the church.

Lessons Learned

The results of this project's survey indicate that Tyler area millennials possess similar views of the church that are represented in national studies. While the survey results reveal a high percentage of the participants intrinsically involved in church during their childhood and

younger adolescent years, as emerging adults, a dramatic shift occurs in the centrality of the church and its role in millennials' daily lives. Area millennials list hypocrisy and judgmentalism as the leading reasons for their church exit. However, an even greater prevailing view not directly addressed in the survey is a view of religious indifference. As previously noted, the placement of church attendance and religious affiliation in the daily lives of Millennials is not a high priority. Although all the survey participants left the church as emerging adults while voicing criticisms of the church, the respondents' prevalent view at the time of this survey appears to be the lack of need for the church and religious association in their daily lives. This view of the church has generational implications since the first-born millennials are approaching middle age and are passing this view to their children.

Despite presenting a view of religious indifference and having other negative views of the church, this generation is not entirely lost. Although they remain absent from the church, most of surveyed millennials expressed a willingness and a desire to return eventually.

Not only did the surveyed millennials open the door for their eventual return to church, but they also provided insights into how best to reach and reengage them. While millennials may have been engaged in relationships within the church prior to their exodus, these relationships were not enough to deter them from leaving. However, after leaving the church, seventy-five percent of survey respondents admit they missed the community and fellowship the church provided in their lives.

Study Implications

The results of this study reveal that, in general, millennials residing in the Tyler area have similar views of the church that are reflected in national studies. Foundationally, this study reveals the continual generational erosion occurring in the millennial cohort and across many generational lines. While caught in the continual onslaught of societal pressures and influences imposed upon emerging adults, it is here that the church needs to regain its foothold in the lives of these struggling adults and be the church it was created to be.

Millennials in the Tyler area have spoken. They desire a relationship with God and to know His Word. However, they want applicable teachings and the freedom to ask difficult questions and verbalize their doubts. Residing in a world prone to isolation and individualism, millennials yearn for Christian fellowship through relational discipleship. Millennials desire to be a part of ministry. They want to see God's love in action beyond the church walls.

Ministry Response

First-born millennials reach the age of forty-two this year. Millennials are no longer emerging adults; they have been absent from the church for many years. They have lived a portion of their lives outside the church, and now, many are open to returning. Millennials have allowed the church an opportunity to reengage with them. However, re-engagement must be on their terms, and church leadership must be prepared.

Next Steps

This quantitative study has revealed that many previously church-affiliated millennials in the sphere of Tyler, Texas, have been influenced by societal-induced postmodernism. While many of these now separated millennials may not knowingly attribute their changed religious

views to this philosophy, it has led an increasing number of area millennials to separate from the church completely. For others, this postmodern influence has prompted them to deconstruct and reject their childhood Christian faith and teachings. While the results of postmodernism and faith deconstruction may be witnessed by church leaders, for many, the genesis of this philosophical ideology and its damaging results have never been thoroughly investigated and addressed.

To bring awareness to the rising influence of postmodernism in the Tyler area, the results of this study will be presented to the Smith Baptist Association Regional Council and other denominational councils in the Tyler area. This presentation will highlight the statistical data gathered in this study that reveals the changing religious views of area millennials. The presentation will discuss the increasing presence of postmodernism in society and how this philosophy continues to influence religion and worldviews in emerging adults.

Knowing that the millennial generation church absence affects all churches and that the awareness of these philosophies and influences may be new to some church leaders, this researcher will recommend a series of workshops to bring awareness, education, and training about the invasion of postmodernism and its influence on worldviews that are antithetical to a Christian worldview. While area churches have witnessed the erosion of the younger generations in their churches, many within the church leadership may be unaware of this secularized worldview that has contributed this generational exit. These meetings can include professors of philosophy, religious studies from area seminaries, sociologists, young adult pastors, and representatives from the millennial and other generations who can all bring their unique perspectives and give insight into how best to address these postmodern philosophies and ideologies that are antagonistic to the Christian worldview.

While bringing together various leaders in these workshops will allow for differing perspectives about the millennial generation to be addressed, the goal is to educate and train church leaders on how to best address these unique generational characteristics from a Christian worldview position. With this Christian platform in mind and with the potential for various denominations to be represented, all attendees must present a personal statement of faith that affirms their belief in the central tenets of the Christian faith. These tenets include: The deity of Christ. The Bible is the inerrant Word of God. All of humanity are sinners. Jesus is the only hope of salvation. The sacrificial death of Jesus. The bodily resurrection of Jesus. The return of Jesus, and the hope of eternal life. Furthermore, if a university, seminary, church, or other organization is represented, the organization's statement of faith must also be presented.

Millennials have voiced their concerns and criticisms about the church's lack of desire or inability to change to meet the evolving world in which it resides. While some millennials feel the church's doctrinal positions are antiquated, the majority do not have this view. However, they desire to see other areas of church ministry redesigned to meet today's changing dynamics.

To bring these issues to the forefront, the researcher would recommend a second church leadership workshop to address the concerns and frustrations millennials have deemed important and need to change to reach or reengage them. These topics include areas such as interactive teaching methods, active and continual ministry outreach initiatives, and the importance of continual relational mentorship (discipleship).

Further Research

Generational dynamics continue to evolve, and the speed of this evolvement has quickened in recent decades. Sociologists are now subdividing generational timeframes due to the rapidly changing and multiple worldviews held by a single generation. Thus, social scientists

can no longer affix a single worldview to a generation. Each emerging generation brings a uniqueness that is unlike any generation before them. This researcher suggests more inclusive, and in-depth quantitative studies to meet these changing societal dynamics and their associated worldviews. Furthermore, since this project's study revealed that many millennials exited the church spiritually and emotionally before physically leaving, the suggestion will be to include older teenagers and emerging adults who have physically remained in the church.

Final Thoughts

For many churches, change is difficult. When change does occur, it is usually in response to a crisis. That is what has occurred with the millennial generation's church absence. It is viewed as a crisis, and most churches have not reacted. First-born millennials are in their early forties; they are no longer emerging adults. Many millennials who left the church at eighteen have been out of church longer than they were in it. However, they have signaled a desire to return if the church is willing to do church differently. They have not asked the church to compromise on its beliefs but to be a place to develop relationships, where questions and doubts can be expressed without reproach and where God's Word is taught in ways applicable to their daily lives. Millennials are asking the church to be the church God created it to be, a representation of heaven on earth.

Appendix A

SHARON BAPTIST CHURCH

ANNOUNCEMENT AND BULLETIN INSERT

ATTENTION SHARON BAPTIST CHURCH: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree at Liberty University. My research aims to gain greater understanding and insight into why many millennials residing in and around Tyler, Texas, left the church and about their changed views toward church and religious beliefs after reaching adulthood.

ABOUT THE SURVEY: The survey is specifically directed toward millennials born between 1981-1996. This is an anonymous online survey, and the participant may stop the survey at any time for any reason. The survey should take approximately 10 minutes.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: To reach as many millennials as possible, I need your help. I am asking you to provide me with as many email addresses of millennials as possible. These potential survey candidates must reside in Tyler, Texas, or the surrounding area. Due to the survey's anonymity, no other personal information is required. Please return this document to me with email addresses in person or you can send the email addresses to my school email: ███████████████

Thank you.

Potential Millennial-Age Candidate (email addresses only):

1. _____   6. _____

2. _____   7. _____

3. _____   8. _____

4. _____9. ____

5. _____   10. _____

Appendix B

EMAIL INVITATION

Dear Friend,

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the Doctor of Ministry degree requirement. The purpose of my research is to gain greater understanding and insight into the specific reasons why many within the millennial generation cohort residing in and around Tyler, Texas, left the church and about their changed views toward the church and religious beliefs after reaching adulthood, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

To participate, you must have been born from 1981 to 1996. You must presently reside in or around Tyler, Texas. You must have attended an Evangelical or Catholic church and regularly attended church, excluding special events such as weddings or funerals, before the age 18. Regular attendance is defined as attending church at least once per month. However, after reaching the age of 18, you ceased attending church and have no church or religious affiliation at the time of this survey. Church denominations that are typically considered Evangelical are: Assembly of God, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, Pentecostal, Seventh-Day Adventist, Presbyterian, and Reformed.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey. It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

A consent document is provided on the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please click the button to proceed to the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to participate in the survey.

To participate, please click here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/K7SL86Q .

Thank you for your participation in this survey.

Sincerely,

Erik Switzer
Graduate Student

Appendix C

SOCIAL MEDIA: FACEBOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to gain greater understanding and insight into the specific reasons why many within the millennial generation cohort residing in and around Tyler, Texas, left the church and about their changed views toward church and religious beliefs after reaching adulthood.

To participate, you must have been born from 1981 to 1996. You must have attended an Evangelical or Catholic church and participated in regularly scheduled church attendance, excluding special events such as weddings or funerals, before the age 18. You must presently reside in or around Tyler, Texas. Regular attendance is defined as attending church at least once monthly. However, after reaching the age of 18, you ceased attending church and have no church or religious affiliation at the time of this survey. Church denominations that are typically considered Evangelical are: Assembly of God, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, Pentecostal, Seventh-Day Adventist, Presbyterian, and Reformed.

You will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey, which should take about 10 minutes to complete. A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. If you want to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/K7SL86Q.

Thank you.

Appendix D

Consent

Title of the Project: Coveting Relationships Over Association: The Church's Response to the Millennials' Exodus
Principal Investigator: Erik Switzer, B.S., M.A.T., MDiv., Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a millennial or born between the years of 1981–1996. You must presently reside in or around Tyler, Texas. You must have attended an Evangelical or Catholic church and participated in regularly scheduled church attendance, excluding special attendance such as weddings or funerals. Regular attendance is defined as attending church a minimum of one time per month. However, after reaching the age of 18, you ceased attending church, and you have no church or religious affiliation at the time of this survey.
Please take time to read this entire consent form and ask any questions before deciding whether to participate in this survey.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to identify the specific reasons and gain a deeper understanding of why many millennials have left the church and refuse to return after reaching adulthood.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
Complete an anonymous online survey. This survey will take approximately 10 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Although you should not expect to receive a direct benefit from your participation in this study, it will allow church leaders to understand better changing generational views towards religious beliefs, the church, and its communal standing within today's culture.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant survey responses will be anonymous.

- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and the researcher's password-protected Survey Monkey account and may be used for future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time before submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Erik Switzer. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Micah Meek, at ▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉▉

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact the study team using the information provided.

Appendix E

Millennial Generation Survey

1. **Please identify your gender.**
___Male   ___Female

2. **Do you presently reside in the Tyler/Smith County area?**
___Yes   ___No

(If you answer "No" to the above question, please close the survey now. Thank you.)

3. **In what generation does your date of birthplace you?[1]**
___ Gen. Z (Born between the years of 1997-2012)
___ Millennial Generation (Born between the years of 1981-1996)
___ Gen. X (Born between the years of 1965-1980)
___ Baby Boomer Generation (Born between the years of 1946-1964)
___ Silent Generation (Born between the years of 1928-1945)

(If your date of birth is not between 1981-1996, please close the survey now. Thank you.)

4. **During your childhood and/or adolescence, was the church you predominately attended one of the following:**
___Catholic
___Evangelical[2] (Evangelical definition and church denominations listed below)
___Other
___Did not attend church[*]

[*](If your above answer is "Did not attend church," please close the survey. Thank you.)

5. **During your childhood or adolescence, did you attend church regularly?** (For the purposes of this survey, regular attendance is defined as attending church a minimum of one time per month).
___Yes   ___No

[*](If your above answer is "No," please close the survey. Thank you.)

---

[1] Dimock, "Defining Generations," In this article, Pew Research Group defines the age differentiation between the Millennial Generation and the Gen. Z cohorts. This survey will utilize the Pew Research Generational time frames as noted within the article.

[2] The National Association of Evangelicals defined a person as evangelical as 1.) A person who holds the Bible in the highest authority. 2.) Encourages non-believers to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior. 3.) Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of a person's sin. 4.) Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation. Church denominations considered to be historically evangelical include but not limited to the following: Assembly of God, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Lutheran, Methodist, non-denominational, Pentecostal, Seven-Day Adventist, Presbyterian, Reformed. Nation Association of Evangelicals, "NAE, Lifeway Research Publish Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition," (November 19, 2015), http://www.ane.org/evangelical-beliefs-research-definition.

6. **During your childhood, was regular church attendance a priority in your household?**
   ___ Yes, church attendance was a priority in my household.
   ___ Church attendance was somewhat of a priority in my household.
   ___ No, church attendance was not a priority in my household.

7. **Prior to reaching 18 years of age, how often did you attend church? (Not including services such as weddings, funerals, etc.)**
   ___ Weekly
   ___ More than once per month
   ___ Less than once per month
   ___ One to two times per year

8. **During your childhood/adolescence, what most influenced you to attend a church?**
   ___ A strong desire to worship God and learn more about the Bible.
   ___ Being a part of a Music/Choir Group
   ___ Parents/Family – The church you attended is where your family attended.
   ___ Social Interaction – You desired to attend a church where your friends worshipped.

9. **As you reflect on your childhood/adolescent church association and attendance, how would you describe the church's influence in your life?**
   ___Positive   ___Neutral (no real influence)   ___Negative

10. **After reaching adulthood, did you continue to attend church regularly?** (For the purposes of this survey, regular attendance is defined as attending church at a minimum of one time per month).
    ___No   ___Yes

*(If your above answer is "Yes," please close the survey. Thank you.)

11. **Have your views of church and your religious affiliation changed since reaching adulthood?**
    ___No   ___Yes

12. **Which of the following best describes your view of the Church and religious affiliation since reaching adulthood?**
    ___ My view has become more negative towards the church since reaching adulthood.
    ___ My view has become more positive towards the church since reaching adulthood.

13. **Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

_____ I feel the church is no longer personally relevant and is not a significant need
          in my personal life.
_____ I feel being a member of a church is important and remains a central part of
          my personal life.
_____ I feel more connected to God when I attend church with other believers.
_____ I feel more spiritually connected to God without attending or being religiously
affiliated with a church.

14. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the church?
_____ I feel the church has become irrelevant and is out of touch with today's society.
_____ I feel the church continues to be relevant and important in today's society.
_____ I view the church as trustworthy.
_____ I view the church with skepticism.

15. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about religious teachings?
_____ I feel there is only one way to God, as Christianity professes.
_____ I feel all religious beliefs can lead to God.
_____ I view the Christian biblical teachings as outdated and irrelevant in today's
culture.
_____ I view the Christian biblical teachings as relevant in today's culture.
_____ I view the Christian biblical teachings as the guide in my daily life.
_____ I view all religious teachings as a guide in my daily life.

**16. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about biblical teaching
methods?**
_____ I prefer a traditional style of preaching/worship service. (A monologue or one-
          directional style of teaching).
_____ I prefer a non-traditional style of preaching/teaching service. (A two-directional
          or conversational style of teaching).

17. List the 3 significant reasons for your departure from the church and religion.

   1._____

   2._____

   3._____

18. What do you miss the most by not being associated with the church?

1.＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

2.＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

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19. Do you consider yourself to be a person who is "spiritual but not religious?" (Defined as desiring or maintaining a relationship with God but not desiring a church or religious affiliation)?
____No
____Yes

20. How likely are you to return to a church in the future?
____ I will definitely not return to a church in the future.
____ There is a possibility I could return to a church in the future.
____ There is a high probability I will return to a church in the future.

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IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 24, 2022

Erik Switzer
Micah Meek

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-1022 Coveting Relationships Over Association: The Church's Response to the Millennial's Exodus

Dear Erik Switzer, Micah Meek,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for

verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office