

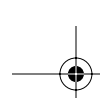
AN INTRODUCTION TO LEAVING THE CHURCH

I've always appreciated a good trade. The summer before my fourteenth birthday, I sat under a tree at a Young Life camp and contemplated the gospel as I understood it: all my weakness, all my insecurities, all my nothingness in exchange for an eternal friendship with God. I knew I was being offered forgiveness too, but at that time I think I was more amazed by the offer of purpose. Could God really use a hyper, underachieving kid like me? I was the product of brokenness, inside me and outside, and the consensus was that I would not amount to anything.

But I knew what I had to do. It was like that feeling you get when you're about to strike a deal for a house or a car or something in a market and the seller is offering a price so low you struggle to contain yourself. You put on the serious face of negotiation, understating your approval, saying, "Okay, I think I can live with that price," while inside you're doing cartwheels. That is how I felt that evening under that tree. Could God really offer me so much for so little? My broken life for his inside me? It felt too good to be true. But I've since learned that God is exceedingly good, that he is both too good and too true. So, I was born anew, into a family of people I had never met.

God had given me purpose and new life. Inside, I was instantly transformed. I began to believe that I might actually





amount to something after all. As a member of God's family, I assumed I was a part of the greatest organization the world could know. Since we all had made the same trade, we were all, I assumed, destined for great things. All of us had traded our mediocrity for something greater, something other people only dreamed of.

Then I went to church. And the worship was archaic and confusing. When God was being talked about, no one asked questions, but I had so many questions. The people were friendly and there were activities for everyone, but I did not need activities. No one seemed to be living in the light of the great trade. I confess, I just went along, waiting for something to click. I stood when they said to, I sat when they said to, I recited the prayers and came and went on time. But something, even then I knew, was missing.

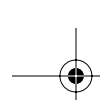
The Elusive Church

So much has changed since those first days of church for me. I've been to other churches, tried various traditions, felt the vibrancy of a new church experience and then again the lifelessness. Sometimes I was convinced it was just me. *I'm too critical, or I'm too distracted*, I thought. Other times, I was sure there was still something missing.

For a long time I defined church as that place people go on Sunday mornings. Then I thought of the church as something universal, invisible. But secretly I wondered if there was something in-between, the local expression of something holy, the gathering of the destined, of those who had accepted the trade.

Going to the place called church remained a central feature of my spiritual life. Yet as a college student trying to live radically for God on a large, secular campus, it began to feel like a pointless exercise. In those years, I went every week and sometimes twice a week because I loved to worship and I





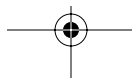
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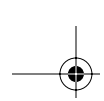
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wanted to be close to God. But the call that my friends and I felt to preach the gospel on campus, the intense, impromptu prayer gatherings, the crying out for more of God and for the rescue of our friends and our campus—it all ruined us for platitudes.

I went on to join InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a parachurch ministry that was gathering students to pray, study the Bible and reach out to the campus. That made sense to me. My InterVarsity staff worker told me I still needed to “find a church.” So I did. And I liked it. But the more seriously I took the Bible, the more I saw in Scripture a very certain call to proclaim a gospel of transformation, a revolutionary gospel, the more I saw what I was doing on Sunday mornings as, well, unrevolutionary. We simply were not impacting anyone by sequestering ourselves in a building and preaching to each other truths we all already believed. There were parts I still liked: seeing my friends, the music, listening to the Word. But I began to wonder about the nature of church, and I began to see church as extraneous to ministry.

After college, I took a ministry position with InterVarsity, got married and welcomed five amazing kids into my world. By faith I moved my family into inner-city Tampa and began forming an intentional community. We bought two houses and committed ourselves to one another and the kingdom of God in what, at the time, was one of the hardest neighborhoods in our city. We loved and prayed and reached out. God began to shape for me a theology that included the poor. We wrestled with the racial rift in America, repented of our contribution and committed ourselves to the cause of reconciliation. I began traveling, taking students and adults to serve and learn from the poor all over the world. I’ve done ministry and met the poor in a dozen nations; in each place and in each encounter I’ve grown more weary of the kind of church we have settled for.





Blessed Are the Leavers

This book is personal. Some have argued that teachers ought to be unbiased, that real science is dispassionate and objective. While I agree that the truth ought to be pursued objectively, once it's ascertained it has to be lived with utter abandon. I'm not unbiased, because God has changed my mind about so many things. I believe the church can and should be more. And I'm ready to accept the possibility that leaving and starting over may be what God is calling some of us to do. I have enough humility to know that about most of these things I may be wrong, but not all.

I cannot write as an academic, because I don't know enough. I cannot write as a historian, because I haven't seen enough. I cannot write as a sociologist, because I remain intimately connected to the subject matter. And I don't write this book as a theologian but as a practitioner of theology. I'm a believer. I'm a leaver. I'm a leader and a church planter. For love and in the pursuit of God and his kingdom, I've become an ecclesiologist, and I'm longing for the church to be more.

This book is for those who have contemplated leaving church because they believe it should be more. This book is for those who have moved from thinking about it to doing, and now they find themselves isolated, ineffective or alone. This book is for people who have made the trade and who are looking for a community of people who know they have a destiny because of it. This book is for people who have secretly longed for the church to arise and take its place as the single most transformative force in the world we know.

