
If Religion = Restrictive, "I'm Leaving It!" "Well, I'm Changing It!" Say the Two Millennials: Welcome to the Second and Third Generation Rebels

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Second and third generation young adult Christians have rebelled against the church of their parents, against the status quo. Therefore, in a simple two-group understanding, they have either left the church altogether or have chosen to cope by personalizing their faith. In response to these two "rebellious" groups, older generations have either pulled in their reins against apostasy of the latter group or have chosen to exclude the mavericks and forget those considered to be "weak" who have left the ranks. What do leaders do with the alarming statistics regarding those who have left, and what do they do with the ever-changing milieu of how the church looks with the few who have stayed but have chosen to alter the tried and true paths? I suggest two things for those working with "rebellious" millennials, 1) Let those who want to leave...leave, but leave with hope and 2) give those who want change... change, but change with support.

Background

Rebel (noun) – 1. revolutionary, insurgent, mutineer, guerrilla, terrorist, freedom fighter;
2. nonconformist, iconoclast, maverick (Lindberg, 2004)

This paper is written from the perspective of an Eastern European immigrant raised as a pastor's kid in America in a conservative Adventist home. I draw on my own background and cultural setting as well as some research and analysis regarding youth and young adults in the light of second and third generation Adventism. I have simplified my grouping of those who are considered "rebels" to two groups: those who leave and those who change. This chapter does not include traditional, content, or "go-with-the-flow" Adventist young people. This chapter focuses on the young "rebels."

Introduction: The Rebels

According to Twenge (2006), author of *Generation Me*, this generation could care less about approval as it relates to the norm or what is accepted. They have grown up hearing, "Be who you want to be" and "be unique; be different." Customizing religion to what they want it to be, or apathy towards it, should come as no surprise. "My beliefs are different," a young adult may say in response to adults who shake their head at this different, young "rebel." The young adult goes on to say, "This is what I believe, it's what's right for me, so deal with it." Such a line from a young person might sound brash or a little out of line or contrary to the status quo, but is it really? Leaders should not be surprised to realize that millennials, the term for those born from 1980-2000 (Ranier & Rainer, 2011), are seeking to customize religion by making it their own. Even though

the thought of change scares most staunch, hardline pioneers in Adventist churches, they should be glad that some millennials are even willing to stick with religion, with Adventism, and make it their own. These “rebels” do not want to live off of the faith of their parents anymore. And this is not necessarily a bad thing.

While one group seeks to customize the traditional way things have always been done, another simply does not care anymore. They are disenfranchised, hurt, bored, lured by the world. These “rebels” leave. Kenda Creasy Dean (2010, p. 3), publishing a pastoral and youth ministry perspective from the research led by Smith & Denton (2005), begins her book saying,

Let me save you the trouble. Here is the gist of what you are about read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we’re responsible.

How should one feel, especially a pastor or parent or teacher, who realizes that much of the time young people spent in church, bible studies, Sabbath School, and worship is simply an “enduring” process because they really are not that interested? It seems that once they get the choice, after they are out of the home or the church school, their faith will not survive. A study by the Barna Group (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p. 27) revealed similar experiences for young adults within the church (second and third generations),

Spirituality is important to young adults, but many consider it just one element of a successful, eclectic life. Fewer than one out of ten young adults mention faith as their top priority...many young people who were involved in a church as a teenager disengage from church life and often from Christianity at some point during early adulthood, creating a deficit of young talent, energy, and leadership in many congregations...our tracking research suggests that today young people are less likely to return to church later, even when they become parents.

Those who hope their lost “rebel” child or youth group member will return face a slim chance such hope will become reality. Religion was not only restrictive to

these “rebels,” it was something that caused either a deep aversion or it did absolutely nothing for them. Who in their right mind would even want to return?

This raises a number of questions. How much should the Seventh-day Adventist Church worry about these second and third generation “rebels”? Should we alter our beliefs to try to appeal to the rebels? Should we make changes or concessions to how church is done? Do we need to take a new stand against potential counterfeit gospels that target those already leaving? Do we need to discover new wine for new wineskins? Or should we just stick with those who stay and not worry about those who leave? What is truly important in sustaining growth from middle school to adulthood for those who grow up in the church? Finally, how can we ensure we are properly “teaching and training our children in the way they should go, so that when they are old they won’t depart from it” (Prov. 22.6)?

Consider the following three things that might be the cause for us to lose our relevance as a church to these “rebels.”

1. Hypocrite!

Respected Adventist youth ministry statistician, Roger Dudley (2011) exposes the potential hypocrisy with some of the church’s standards. Considering 10 behavioral standards and the level of agreement young people have with these, Dudley found at least three-fourths in agreement not to use tobacco, drugs, alcohol; and agree to dressing modestly; Sabbath observance; and no sex outside of marriage. But when it came to not wearing cosmetic jewelry, listening to rock music, dancing and attending movie theaters, only a minority were in agreement with the traditional Seventh-day Adventist standards. Dudley (2011) concluded:

If these last four standards really do have a Biblical base, and if they continue to be relevant to Adventism, then the church, and especially youth ministries leaders, will need to find ways through study and dialogue to lead to a commitment on the part of young adults to these standards. Otherwise, they should be removed from the list, for standards that are proclaimed but not practiced only lead to charges of hypocrisy.

This illustrates one of the ways hypocrisy shows itself—we emphasize one thing, then do another. Such is the case many times in church and home settings, as well as in Adventist schools. Although the issues may vary, hypocrisy kills no matter where it happens. Hypocrisy devalues everything for which the church stands.

Hypocrisy also shows itself when church people make poor choices. News spreads quickly when a pastor leaves a spouse for the church secretary, or it becomes public knowledge that the elder abuses his children, or the youth leader drinks and goes to clubs, or the parents do not actually have personal devotions like they tell their kids to do. Relational ruptures make the current generation sensitive to breakdowns with people, especially in church, since millennials value the advice and friendship of older adults and parents more than previous generations (Ranier & Ranier, 2011). Leaders and mature members who damage those vital relationships by hypocritical lifestyles undercut their influence in the lives of young people. This leads the “rebels” to ask, “If the church does not make that much of a difference in how they are living, why would it make much of a difference in my life?”

2. Authentic Jesus Living

First, second, and third generation kids, youth, young adults, parents, educators, adults, leaders, pastors all need trust—trust that you and I will be who we say we are. We need authenticity. We need it in the church. And we expect the church to help us in this endeavor. Failure in this seems to devastate many. Success seems to impact only a few. We expect and hope that the gospel really will transform. We desire a gospel that lifts up Jesus so that all will draw to Him (John 12.32). Jim Hohnberger (2005, p. 83-84) hints at this when he spoke to a group of pastors one day,

Once I was invited to speak to a group of ministers... What should I say when addressing the “experts”? As I stood at that podium, I said, “I wish every time a minister stood in the pulpit, a big screen would come down behind him and show how he led his life in the preceding week—how he acted in his home with his children and his wife, how he responded to temptations and trials. Would you get up and preach if those were the conditions?”

“No!” the ministers responded.

“Then my friends, you have not found the gospel. Jesus would have had no problem with such a condition, nor should we. He knew His actions were just as straight and pure as His doctrines.

“I am not saying we should all be spiritual supermen who never fail, but God’s desire for us is that failure should be the exception rather than the rule in our lives. Further, when we do fail, He wants us to get back up and continue on our life journeys with Him, not wallow in self-pity.”

Young people need to see authentic Christians. Authenticity does not mean perfection, but authenticity does mean that how we act in our everyday lives at home and work should be the same at church. When young people who grew up in the church see men and women who are living transformed lives everyday because of Jesus, we will see young people who desire to be part of the church and who want their children to be part of it, too.

About a year ago my wife and I were in the car listening to a podcast testimony of a man who told of how he attended two churches for over three years—one an Adventist church, the other a non-denomination Sunday church. The Adventist church fed him intellectually and made him seem like a good Adventist. The non-denominational Sunday church fed his craving for authentic worship and meaningful relationships centered in Jesus. The speaker felt alive and loved and he met Jesus at the Sunday church. Imagine that!

A young adult friend of mine told me a similar experience one day when he said he was going to church that night. He noticed my perplexed look since there was no service at our Adventist church that evening. Apprehensively, he said he was going to the non-denominational Sunday church about fifteen minutes away. “The people really like me there, and love me, and I need that,” he said with a sad and solemn look. His eyes showed disappointment in our church, but also embarrassment that he had to find community elsewhere.

3. Differing Values and a Lack of Internalized Truth

The changing values of this new generation have altered what we view as supremely important in our lives. Knowing that Jesus Christ is one’s Savior no

longer marks the highest value. What counts now is how knowing God as one's Savior can be incorporated into a Millennial's greatest values, everyday lifestyle and struggles. According to Holmes (1977, p. 40), "...a man is ruled not by what he knows but by what he most loves as a whole person and with his whole heart. Knowledge is tied to our personal involvements: it is not impersonal nor detached." In past generations people viewed God as a ruling tyrant, an impersonal being to be feared and revered. In contrast, the current generation has grown up with a "Jesus is my homeboy ©" mentality, which emphasizes relationship more than reverence.

Older generations emphasize reverence while younger generations feel drawn to relationship. Trying to bring these together often results in cognitive dissonance for both generations. Those who favor the relational perspective might speak of reverence, but not demonstrate it as a core value. The same could be said of those who place a higher value on reverence than relationship. When Adventism gets passed on from one generation to the next by imparting information to the head only, the heart continues untouched. The current generation operates from the heart. Truth must have an anchor and experience there. When the second and third generations sense a lack of heart in Adventism, they turn to God apart from Adventism. This further contributes to a spirituality that differs from previous generations, which is not necessarily wrong. Yet, if the divide grows wider, the church will grow smaller and weaker.

Two "Rebellious" Millennials, Two "Rebellious" Ideas: Leave With Hope—Change With Support

A number of second and third generation young adult Christians have rebelled against the church of their parents. They have either left the church altogether or have chosen to cope by creating a separate and personalized faith. In response to these two "rebellious" groups, older generations shake their heads in disgust or disappointment regarding those who leave and attempt to correct those who have created their own faith. But if this church is going to be relevant, it needs to rethink how it is doing in sharing, teaching, and discipling followers of Jesus, not followers of Adventism. I know countless young people who know the Adventist lingo: vespers, haystacks, engagement watch (not ring!), "Happy Sabbath," no Sabbath jobs, the "Spirit of Prophecy," vegeburgers, and Sunday laws, but they have absolutely no clue how to have a personal friendship with Jesus.

We have taught them Adventism, but we haven't taught them Jesus. Therefore, they will act like "rebels" and leave, or change.

I suggest two things to those working with "rebellious" millennials, 1) let those who want to leave...leave, but leave with hope and 2) give those who want change...change, but change with support.

Leave: With Hope

Some counseling professionals believe that adolescent emancipation with potential rejection of authority figures might be necessary or even expected in the growth process towards achieving one's personal identity. I agree, to an extent. But to make this a healthy transition in the church we need to make sure that "the religious experiences during the formative years are as satisfying and enriching as we can possibly make them" (Tegeson, 1962, p. 143). The problem is that we failed to do just that. Those early years were not satisfying and they were far from a meaningful or enriching process for the "rebel." So now we are in an emergency.

Hospitals respond to serious illness and accidents by having a portion of the hospital designated as ICU—Intensive Care Unit. In order for these potentially fatal patients to survive and to stabilize, medical personnel place them in the ICU for access to the best resources in the hospital and to provide constant monitoring and surveillance.

Perhaps we should have ICU portions of our church for the rebels. When a young person chooses to leave, we cannot and should not try to entertain them while their heart is not there. Those who try the entertainment model end up condoning apathy and perpetuating the cycle of building weak Christians with a weak faith. In the end, they will still leave, in this generation or the next. We see this happening now. I say, "Let them leave." Why try to imprison them? Yet we cannot consider this without an ICU—an Intensive Care Unit. We need a spiritual Intensive Care Unit pumping hope through their veins. This must be done practically, not only from a distance or in silence. Each church must be in prayer for the resources—God, human, financial, presence, community—and the desire to be a spiritual ICU that somehow stays connected with them while they are absent from the building, but not absent from the Body of the Church.

Change: With Support

Change is not necessarily a bad thing. Many consider young people to be “rebels” when they change how worship is done in the church, or dress differently, or observe Sabbath in non-traditional ways, or seem unconcerned about some church doctrines. Instead of pigeon-holing people into either “loyal Adventists” or the category of “rebels,” let’s come together and agree to dialogue, confess our inconsistencies, and identify what is central bedrock compared to what is peripheral or disputable. Let’s ask how this relates to Jesus and our commitment to him. In this spirit and practice of on-going dialogue, we are able to provide support, even to rebels!

We can show support by inviting participation in church ministry from an early age. Older generations can serve as mentors without expecting exact replicas as young people are shown how to do ministry and then are given enough liberty to make it their own. Another way to show support is to be intentionally multigenerational. The Body of Christ isn’t uniform, but it works together. What it shares in common is Christ, not merely one generation’s understanding of Christ. Older generations show support by releasing their power, money, influence, and other resources into the hands of younger generations, including rebels. Challenge them to take the lead and to explore new areas that previous generations haven’t dared to attempt. Tell them, “Even if it means failure, go for it! Fail and try again. Succeed and watch me smile. Build what was not, and create what should have been. I will give you advice, but only if you ask. We will be with you.” Will they fail, sure, but they will win even more (Kinnaman, 2011)! Let God do for the “rebels” what He did with you when you were young. Pray for humility and courage to let go, and truly let God do what He needs to do with this young generation.

Conclusion

I think the greater question to ask is, “Are leaders afraid that these ‘rebels’ will leave the church, or that they will leave Jesus?” If “rebels” leave because we did not teach them enough about doctrine, we may have failed. But if they leave without ever having a relationship with Jesus, then we have really failed and the blood will be on our hands (Ez. 33). If “rebels” feel compelled to leave, let them do so with hope by connectedness. And empower the other “rebels” to change your church by supplying support. After all, that’s what Jesus did with his followers.

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