

## **A "Boomer" Responds To Rachel Held Evans On "Millennials"**

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I'm somewhat of a late comer to this discussion. Just over a week ago (July 27, to be exact) blogger/author Rachel Held Evans wrote a guest piece for CNN's Belief Blog entitled Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church. I've followed Ms. Evan's blogging for some time, and this article didn't really break any new ground, either for her, or for the Church. But the appearance of the article on a "larger platform" such as CNN gave it wider-than-normal exposure, which generated more-than-normal attention. Not to mention more responses. One of the benefits of not being a "millennial" is, well, the ability to offer a little perspective. At least I hope so. But before I can do that, I need to offer a disclosure and a definition.

### **"Millennials" Versus "Boomers"**

Let me begin with a shameless personal disclosure: I am a "Boomer". This means I am part of that Post-World War 2 generation born between about 1946 and 1960. I was born in 1954. Mine is the generation of the VietNam War, the draft (yes, I had a draft card), the Beatles, the Cold War, Flower Power, free love, Haight-Asbury, Berkley Free Speech, The Black Panthers, "Love Story," and The Jesus Movement. I was raised as a United Methodist (yep, the "liberal" guys), made a profession of faith the summer between my Junior and Senior years of High School at a small Southern Baptist Church outside of Fayetteville, North Carolina and did street ministry for a year among GIs returning from Southeast Asia. I went on to the University of North Carolina where, along with a group of committed believers, I helped lead a campus-wide outreach and spiritual awakening in the Spring of 1975. My reason for sharing this (beside the fact that I said it would be a "shameless personal disclosure") is to make a point: Millennials, such as Ms. Evans, are not the first generation of believers to confront the task of reaching their unique generation for the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it is the task of every generation to do so. So, consider what follows to be the reflections of an aging spiritual "Boomer," taking what little he has learned and passing it on from one generation to the next.

OK, about Millennials. They represent the largest single generation since the Post-World War 2 "Boomers". Born between roughly 1981 and 1995 they number something on the order of 76 million. They represent a highly diverse generation that welcomes, accepts and celebrates both diversity and equality. Millennials are highly empowered by technology. In a very real sense, theirs is the first true "digital generation". Every aspect of their lives is entwined with technology, hence the descriptive phrase, "Digital Natives." Ms. Evans sums it up well, "I wrote my first essay with a pen and paper, but by the time I graduated from college, I owned a cell phone and used Google as a verb. I still remember the home phone numbers of my old high school friends, but don't ask me to recite my husband's without checking my contacts first. I own mix tapes that include selections from Nirvana and Pearl Jam, but I've never planned a trip without Travelocity." Interesting. I prefer Expedia and Kayak over Travelocity, but I remember rotary dial phones and the three letter phone prefix for the phone in the home where I grew up (HUD was the prefix, referring to the "Hudson" exchange). I went through Seminary with a SmithCorona Super 12 electric typewriter, but I'm writing this newsletter on Gmail with a laptop. Yep, things have changed.

As a result of their digital addictions, Millennials frequently develop and manage their identities on line. Theirs is "the Facebook Generation" in which friends, interests, aspirations, spirituality and more are all on display on social networks for everyone to see. This has also fostered a change in relationships. Millennials have replaced dating with "hooking up," relationships which are much more casual and involve no commitment, summarized by the phrase "Friends with benefits" (i.e., friends who have sex, in case you're wondering). Millennials tend to be a highly passionate and positive generation which believes they can make a difference in the world. So much for "Millennial" generalities. Let's look at specifics, as Ms. Evans explains them to us.

### **The Church And Millennials**

OK, it's time to dig into "the meat of the matter." Let's begin with the topic itself, "Why Millennials Are Leaving The Church". The topic of "church leavers" certainly isn't new. Over ten years ago a New Zealand doctoral student in Sociology named Alan Jaimieson was writing about "The Ten Myths Of Church Leavers." (Alan's book, A Churchless Faith: Faith Journey's Beyond The Churches," based on his doctoral work, is available on Amazon). Some 13 years ago, about the time Ms Evans was looking forward to graduation from college, my wife and I left the traditional institutional church and began a journey into "organic church" and service among "the least of these." Simply put, Millennials are not the first generation of believers to go in search of the Kingdom of God outside the walls of the institutional church. Many of us have been on that journey longer than most Millennials.

Survey Says . . . Ms. Evans Millennial critique of evangelicalism includes a reference to "survey" results. Surveys can be helpful tools. The Barna organization has been doing them and writing books about them for 20 years. If you want a church

run by survey results and marketing, join the Willow Creek Association. They're experts at it. But be warned: there are problems. Surveys give you a snapshot in time concerning people's wants and desires. Studies, on the other hand, show the results of implementing those surveys. And the studies done throughout the Willow Creek network reveal that while the model is effective at attracting Millennials (and others), it fails at the most basic task assigned to the Church, namely, the making of committed disciples (for more, click here). There is a significant danger in attempting to build your "Ecclesiology" on surveys. Better to disciple a handful of Millennials who "get it," than to fill a megachurch building with hundreds of Millennials who don't. Get it?

What Millennials Think. Ms. Evans proceeds with an overview of how Millennials view Evangelical Christianity: too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. She goes on to observe that, according to research (read "surveys"), "young evangelicals often feel they have to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith, between science and Christianity, between compassion and holiness." She concludes by observing how "the evangelical obsession with sex can make Christian living seem like little more than sticking to a list of rules."

It is difficult to respond accurately to such wide-ranging observations, which include both truth and misrepresentation. Evangelical Churches are too political, but so are liberal non-Evangelical Churches. The condemnation of one for being "too political" must apply equally to the other. Before accusing Evangelicals of being unconcerned with "social Justice" it might be helpful to define the term (more about this below). For the past 200 years - in response to the vitriolic attacks of philosophical "modernism" - Evangelical Christians have been forced to defend both their intellectual integrity and their faith. Many of us were engaged in defending both our intellectual integrity and our faith (that's called "apologetics") in hostile Post-Christian environments on secular University campuses before Ms. Evans parents even considered having kids. It's what Tertullian did in response to inquisitive Romans of the Third Century, and it's what we do in response to inquisitive postmodern Millennials of the 21st Century. It is a timeless - and apparently thankless - task. Get used to it, because it isn't going away any time soon. And as for sex, "obsession with sex" didn't start with Evangelicals, not unless Hugh Hefner was an Evangelical. The "sexual boundaries" of biblical faith were well established for 3,000 years (no sex before marriage, no sex outside of marriage, no sex with family members, no sex inside your gender, no sex outside your species). The "sexual revolution" of the 60s (and beyond), led by such people as Hugh Hefner and Helen Gurley Brown, challenged those boundaries. The Evangelical Church found itself challenged and forced to defend its beliefs by an increasingly sex-obsessed culture determined to eliminate all sexual boundaries. Sexual purity Biblically defined (by the 5 boundaries I listed above) has been a characteristic of biblical faith for 3,000 years. If anyone is "obsessed" with sex, it appears to be those seeking to overturn 3,000 years of biblical teaching.

## What Millennials Want

Now, this is where things get, well, interesting. Ms. Evans offers a list of things Millennials want, spiritually speaking, introduced with a call to "substance" over "style" (Amen to that!). I want to comment on Ms. Evans list of Millennial wants," and I will try to be brief:

**1) We want an end to the culture wars.** As noted above, Millennials want greater involvement in "social justice" but an end to "culture wars." If only it were that simple. The problem is that one person's "social justice" is someone else's "culture war." For example, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached from the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta against racial discrimination, was that a call to "social justice" or a call to war against a white-dominated culture of discrimination? Yes, it was. And there's the rub. You aren't ending the culture wars. You're simply changing labels and adopting different issues. One person's "social justice" is someone else's "culture war." The difference is often one of perspective.

**2) We want a truce between science and faith.** Sorry. It simply isn't going to happen, not as long as the Hitchens and Dawkins (et. al.) of the world continue to publicly attack Christianity as being "anti-intellectual" or "anti-science" or whatever pejorative they choose to use. Those of us who have been engaged in philosophical apologetics over the past 40 years have known that "modern science" (or more properly, "postmodern science") has been predicated on certain "axioms," including the following: 1) there is no God; 2) the universe is a closed system of materialistic cause and effect; 3) miracles are not possible. Given these three "axioms," Christianity and biblical faith are - by definition - myths, or dangerous delusions. In his book, "Why I Am Not A Christian," British mathematician and atheist Bertrand Russell asked rhetorically, "Do I have to believe in talking donkeys in order to be a Christian?" The answer, of course is "No." But you DO have to believe in a God who is able to make a donkey talk if He chooses to do so. The same is true in the realm of faith and science. Do Millennials (or anyone else) have to believe in a literal 7-day creation in order to be a Christian? No, they don't. But they MUST believe in a God who is able to create the universe in seven days if He chose to do so. And there's the rub. Our problem isn't necessarily with science, but with our view of God. And that is where Millennials (like the rest of us) must begin in order to resolve this tension.

**3) We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against.** Amen! And in a perfect world, that would be the case. In a perfect world we would be known only for the salt and light of our good deeds performed in the name of Jesus. But in this imperfect world we will be known for both. There are numerous reasons, including the reality that to stand for one thing is to oppose its opposite. To stand for biblical righteousness is to stand against those things which offend that righteousness. To stand for the Kingdom of God and its values is to also stand against the kingdoms of men who have no interest in the values of the Kingdom or in Jesus being their King. To be "pro-life" and to stand for the rights of the unborn is to stand against those who would insist that the unborn have no rights. And the list goes on, as it always has.

**4) We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers.** This is a nuanced statement which requires a nuanced response. Actually, it requires a story. In his book, "The Case For Faith," author Lee Strobel tells the story of two men - two preaching colleagues. In 1949 Billy Graham and Charles Templeton were preaching colleagues with Youth For Christ. Their ministries were booming, but both were wrestling with "questions" they could not answer. Doubts they could not resolve. Finally, at a Bible conference with Henrietta Mears in the late Summer of 1949, Billy Graham took a long walk with God and made a personal commitment to accept the Bible as God's authoritative word by faith, in spite of his unresolved questions. The following month Graham undertook his Greater Los Angeles Crusade which catapulted him to national prominence as an evangelist. Charles Templeton, on the other hand, was unable to make such a commitment of faith. Overwhelmed by his own questions and doubts, Templeton eventually left the ministry. In 1957 he declared himself an agnostic. Christians - including Millennials - should never be afraid to ask questions. But neither should they be afraid of "predetermined answers." The existence of a "predetermined answer" simply means that you are NOT the first person to ask or wrestle with that question. Other pilgrims have trod this road, and have left markers ("predetermined answers") to guide those of us who follow behind them. Sometimes their "predetermined answers" are correct. But embracing them requires a degree of humility, and a faith on our part that precedes understanding. Like Anselm, we must believe in order that we might understand. Humility and caution would remind us that life, ministry and eternity are not determined by the questions we ask, but by the answers we choose to embrace, to believe and to build our lives upon. And that makes "predetermined answers" to critical questions of more than passing significance.

**5) We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation.** Again, Amen! But beware the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus places high demands upon all who would be disciples of that Kingdom. The Kingdom demands that we repent of our sin and rebellion, submit the totality of our lives to the King, and take up His cross daily in order to follow Him. Like all of us who have responded to Jesus' call to "follow me," Millennials must give up their "wants" in exchange for the Kingdom's "demands." Jesus does not give us what we "want," but in the call of the Kingdom He offers us what we "need": pardon for our rebellion, forgiveness for our sin, reconciliation with God, redemption from the marketplace of slavery to unrighteousness, along with a yoke which is comparatively easy and burden which is comparatively light. He offers us a Jesus-shaped spirituality, but that's a discussion for another day.

**6) We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities.** I agree . . . to a point. Jesus loved and embraced the marginalized, irrespective of their condition. Indeed, because He embraced the marginalized, He was frequently accused of spending too much time with "tax collectors and sinners." But neither Jesus nor the Kingdom ever left people in the same condition in which He found them. For this reason, the Kingdom is a "discomforting" place. It is constantly confronting our sin and rebellion, while challenging us to greater faith and obedience. Jesus embraced the marginalized Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4), but He did not leave her as He found her. He confronted her lifestyle and challenged her to greater faith and obedience. As a result of her faith and obedience, her entire village came to a knowledge of Jesus as the Messiah. Can the same be said concerning your faith community and your LGBT friends? Are they (and you) experiencing the challenge of the Kingdom to greater faith and obedience? Are you, at some point, being as forthright in your response to their questions regarding their faith and sexuality as Ravi Zacharias is to this questioning student?

**7) 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 becoming peacemakers.** Again, AMEN! Here's the problem. Holiness is unrelated to any of the things mentioned here (that'll ruffle some traditional feathers). There are non-believers who do everything on this list (and more) but who are not "holy" in any Biblically meaningful way. Holiness isn't about what you do or don't do. Holiness is about Who you are, Who you know, Who knows you, and into whose image you and I are being transformed. We aren't holy because we serve "the least of these." We are holy because our lives are in submission to the God Who is "Holy, Holy, Holy." But genuine holiness in the life of the believer will eventually express itself in the obedience of seeking, embracing and serving the marginalized (along with other good deeds of "salt" and "light"). If Millennials want to be more holy, then they - like the rest of us - must start by submitting their lives to the Messiah-King. Obedience to His commands will do the rest.

**She Nails The Truth Of The Matter**

Finally, Ms. Evans summarizes her observations concerning Millennials and the Church with a statement that deserves our undivided attention: "We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus." And that, friends, is "the money quote" and the whole heart of the matter. For all of her existential meanderings in her post, Ms. Evans has nailed it here. Virtually every study done of church-leavers over the past decade or so has come to the same conclusion. Author Reggie McNeal, Director of leadership development for the South Carolina Baptist Convention stated it this way some 10 years ago:

*"A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith. They contend that the church no longer contributes to their spiritual development. In fact, they say, quite the opposite. The number of "post-generational" Christians is growing. David Barrett, author of the World Christian Encyclopedia, estimates that there are about 112 million "churchless Christians" world wide, and about 5 percent of all adherents, but he projects that number will double in the next twenty five years!"*

Again, people (including Millennials, but not exclusively) are leaving the church as we and they have known it, not because they have lost their faith but in order to preserve their faith, or to find it outside the walls of organized religion. In the words of the late Michael Spencer, they are in search of a Jesus-shaped spirituality as opposed to the religion-shaped spirituality they were offered. They left in search of Jesus. Our task for this generation - as in every generation - is to help them find Him.