

# Exodus from Orthodoxy?

Are Young Adults Leaving the Church  
(and What Can We Do About It)?

*Presented by:*



# About the Author

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A graduate of Yale University, Fordham University School of Law, and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Steve is passionate about sharing the Gospel in a clear and accessible way and helping people see Christ at work in their lives.

Here's some of the work he and his Team offer:

## **VIDEO SERIES:**

Be the Bee, The Trench, Live the Word, Books of the Bible

## **PODCASTS:**

Pop Culture Coffee Hour, We are Orthodoxy

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

Y2AM Ministry Plan, Effective Christian Ministry, BeeTreats



I'm sure you know one.

A person who grew up Orthodox and *no longer identifies as Orthodox*.

In fact, I'm *confident* you know far more than just one.

Most of the people I grew up with fall into this category.



And, if we don't change the way we do ministry, we'll see *far more* young people fall away from the Church in the years ahead.

So what can we do?

This is a big question, so it's something we'll explore in the three parts of beginning with Part I.

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“GOD NEVER SAID THAT THE JOURNEY  
WOULD BE EASY, BUT HE DID SAY  
THAT THE ARRIVAL WOULD BE  
WORTHWHILE.

-Max Lucado

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# Part I:

## Are Young Adults Leaving the Church?

### A YOUNG ADULT'S STORY

Meet Catherine.

Catherine is a young adult who I met a few years ago. She's what we often call "cradle Orthodox." She grew up in the Church. She was raised within the Church.



In fact, she was probably more active in the Church than most people I know. And yet, today, *she's struggling to identify as Orthodox*.

So what happened?

When she was a kid, Catherine was involved in *everything*. She attended youth group and Sunday School. She was a member of the parish dance troupe and on the roster of several parish sports teams. She was at the parish more evenings than she wasn't.

And all that changed when she graduated high school...

Catherine went from being involved in *everything* to being involved in *nothing*. After a few years of being completely estranged from the Church, I met her as she was deciding whether she could come back.

She was looking for a new young adult group to join, something to take the place of her old youth group.



And I realized that this pursuit reflected a deep problem in Catherine's life, a problem that stems from the way we've been doing ministry.

You see, Catherine wasn't really looking to reconnect with the Church, the mystical Body of Christ. She was looking to join a new group.

Why is that troubling?

Because Catherine was looking to join yet another group for one simple reason: *she never felt like she was truly a member of the Church*. In fact, being a part of the Church wasn't even on her radar.

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## HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

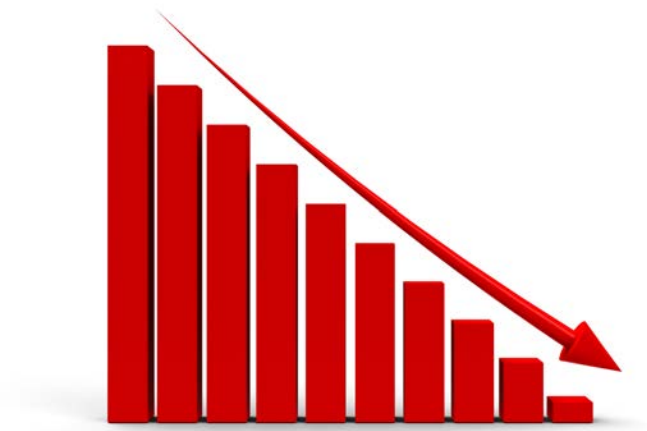
In the United States, a nationwide study by the Barna Group found that about 60% of young Christians fall away from the tradition that raised them.

While we lack similar data focused specifically on the Orthodox Church, the numbers that we do have aren't encouraging...

In 2010, the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops conducted the first ever census of Orthodox Christians in the United States. I actually participated in this project, and contacted every parish in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

The census found that there were 799,400 Orthodox Christians in the USA.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Christian Herald newspaper used to publish population data for various Christian groups in the United States. The last time they included the Orthodox Church in such a study was in 1947, when they reported that there were 702,273 Orthodox Christians in the United States.



If we accept these numbers, that means that the population of the Orthodox Church in the US rose 14% over about six decades. Not too bad, right?



Unfortunately, in the same period, the total US population more than doubled. Had the Orthodox Church grown at a similar rate, we'd be counting *more than 1.4 million members today*.

*But we aren't.*

And based on what I've seen growing up in the Church, and conversations I've had with Orthodox Christians across the country, none of this is surprising.



After all, about 90% of the young people I grew up with have fallen away from the Church.

I know this is anecdotal, but it's unfortunately not surprising, nor is it unique. In fact, when I share this number, people tend to report that they've experienced similar loss in their own communities.

While the Orthodox Church may not be able to quantify the problem as precisely as the Barna Group did, the little data that we do have seems to reinforce the experience of so many ministry leaders: *young people are falling away from the Church at an unsustainable rate*.

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“ THE POPULATION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES ROSE 14% IN THE LAST SIX DECADES. IN THE SAME TIME PERIOD, THE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES MORE THAN DOUBLED.

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## BUT EXODUS ISN'T THE COMPLETE STORY

While we need to be honest about just how widespread this problem of disengagement has become, we can also be reassured that *it's not the whole story*. Many parishes in the United States welcome new converts to the Church every year.

According to most reports, a significant portion of this group (maybe even the majority) are young adults.

And this actually fits with some of the data that the Pew Research Center has discovered: namely, that the Orthodox Church tends to skew younger than other Christian groups in the United States.



I've personally corresponded with, and met in person, dozens of these young adults in the last few years. When I lead young adult events across the country, *a significant number of self-identified converts are always in attendance*.

And these converts include teenagers as well. In fact, while leading a retreat, I recently met a high school senior who is in the process of entering the Church. And I've heard from people even younger than that who, after watching the videos Y<sup>2</sup>AM produces and experiencing the beauty of the Divine Liturgy, took the incredible step of becoming Orthodox Christians.



So, while a substantial number of young people are falling away from the Church, *an impressive number are entering at the same time.*

Why?

## **WHY SOME LEAVE (AND OTHERS JOIN)**



The National Study of Youth and Religion suggests that there are three factors that contribute to a young person's decision to remain connected to the faith tradition that raised them.

These factors are whether:

1. the faith was practiced at home;
2. the young person knew someone outside the family who practiced the faith seriously; and
3. the young person had a spiritual experience that brought them closer to God.

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“ WHEN I LEAD YOUNG ADULT (AND EVEN YOUTH) EVENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF SELF-IDENTIFIED CONVERTS ARE ALWAYS IN ATTENDANCE.

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As Seraphim Danckaert summarized this: “One could therefore say that a person is most likely to retain Christian faith throughout adult life if he or she had three *meaningful and healthy relationships* in their early to mid teenage years: one with faithful Christian parents, one with a faithful Christian mentor outside of the family, and one with God Himself.”

So these factors at least help us understand why young people who grew up in the Church *fall away*.

But they also help us understand why young people *enter the Church*.

I’ve certainly seen this in the young adult converts that I’ve met or corresponded with. In my experience, they all point to: (1) the influence of someone who took the Faith seriously, and (2) a religious experience.



Sometimes this is the influence of a friend, sometimes this is the influence of a clergyman, and sometimes this is the influence of a favorite author or podcaster who helped bring them into the Church.

As far as religious experiences, this can be anything from a visit to a monastery or a first experience of the Divine Liturgy.

Whatever shape they take, these relationships and experiences help lead people into the loving embrace of the Church.

They help counteract the challenges that have come to define young adulthood today.

*What exactly are these challenges?*

We'll explore them in Part II.

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The Orthodox Church is having trouble forming a new generation of faithful Christians
- But exodus isn't the whole story: many young adults (and even teenagers) are entering the Church
- Why some people leave the Church and why others enter are two sides of the same coin
- The more we understand what's actually happening, the better we can minister to the young people in our care



## Part II

# The Three Big Challenges of Young Adulthood

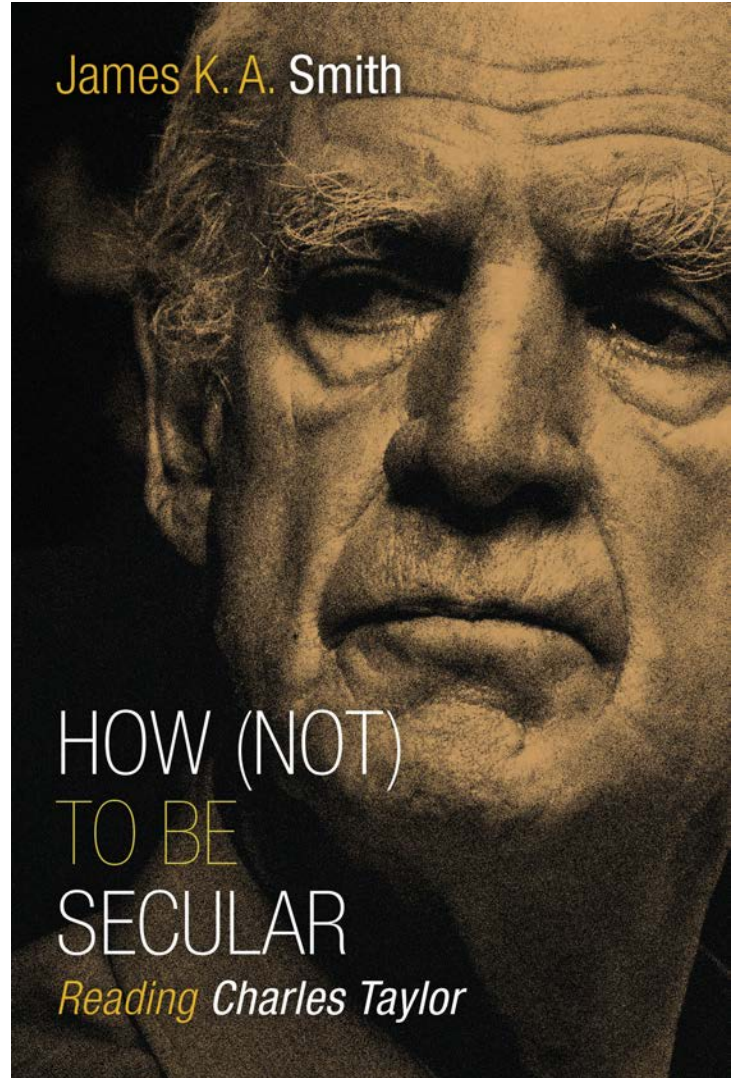
### UNDERSTANDING OUR TIME

If you've ever listened to Pop Culture Coffee Hour, you know that Christian and I have learned a lot from the work of philosophers like Charles Taylor and James K.A. Smith.

Specifically, we've found their explanation of the nature of our "secular age" to be incredibly enlightening, and it's had a lot of influence on our ministry work.

(If you'd like a crash course on what they've written, check out this video.)

The analysis of thinkers like Taylor and Smith, and our own conversations with thousands of people across the Church, have led us to focus on *three big challenges* that young people face today.



These are three challenges that complicate life and, when left unchecked, *can lead people further away from the Church.*

- Doubt
- Loneliness
- Uncertainty

## THE CHALLENGE OF DOUBT

Doubt has become a staple of the modern religious experience. Trapped as we are in what Taylor calls the “cross-pressure” between faith and doubt, all of us experience doubt in some form. People who try to identify as believers are tempted by unbelief, but it works the other way as well:



*People who try to identify as non-believers are tempted by belief.*

I've spoken before about my struggles with doubt, and I've yet to meet a Christian who hasn't had their own version of this story. What's more, I'd be lying if I said that my doubts live firmly in the past; rather, *doubt is perennially present.*

And not just for me or for other believers, but even for those who don't believe: the difference is that *they* doubt their *unbelief.*



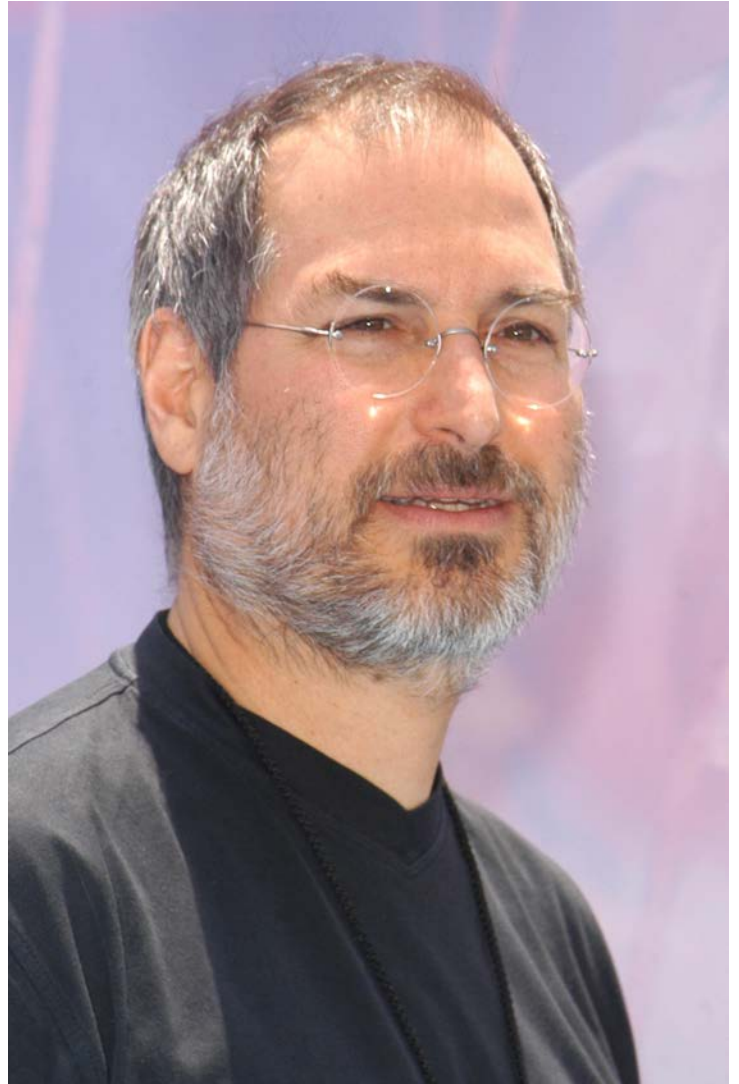
Consider Apple co-founder Steve Jobs who, despite not believing in God or the afterlife, was especially tempted by belief in the divine in the final months of his life.

Or consider the opening line of Julian Barnes' novel *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*: "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."

To quote James K.A. Smith, "The doubter's doubt is belief."

We all live in the cross-pressure between faith and doubt.

Of course, as a ministry worker who's trying to help young people



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“ MAYBE IT'S 'COS I WANT TO BELIEVE IN AN AFTERLIFE, THAT WHEN YOU DIE, IT DOESN'T JUST ALL DISAPPEAR. BUT SOMETIMES I THINK IT'S JUST LIKE AN ON-OFF SWITCH. CLICK AND YOU'RE GONE. AND THAT'S WHY I DON'T LIKE PUTTING ON-OFF SWITCHES ON APPLE DEVICES.

-Steve Jobs

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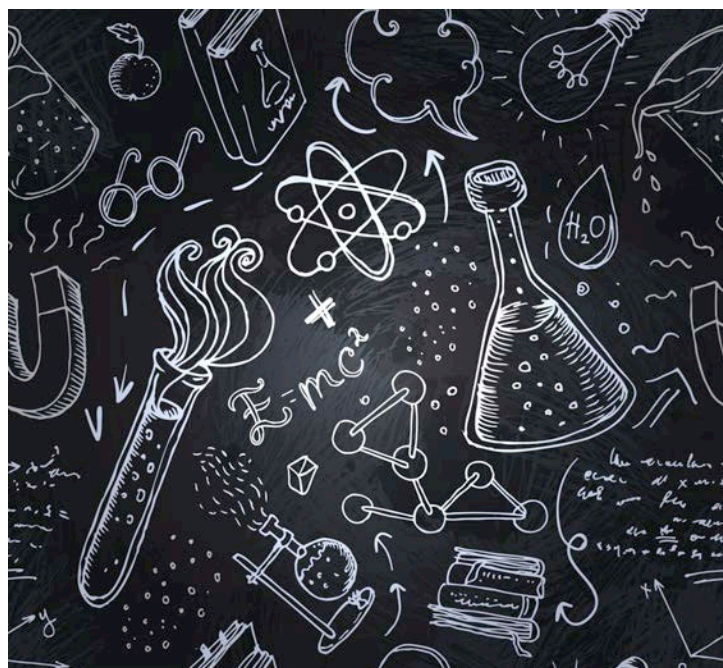


know Christ, I'm primarily concerned about the doubt that leads people away from belief.

These kinds of doubts have deep roots in contemporary culture. For a variety of reasons (which we briefly summarize here), we live in a world where people rely on the power of science and technology, rather than God, to make the world whole.

We are firmly grounded in a world that makes sense in purely physical and non-spiritual terms.

In our contemporary age, for example, it is no longer God who heals the sick; it is medicine. The sun is no longer a god that gives life to the world; it is a ball of gas burning millions of miles away.



Because, in short, *the world has become flat and purely material*; merely immanent, with no room for spiritual realities or God's Providence. The presence of the divine is no longer assumed to be a basic fact about the cosmos, but is an idea relegated to temples and cathedrals where the devout can pay homage to spirits in the privacy of their own minds.

We've reached a point where God, in a sense, is no longer loose in the world. He is just an idea that has been *flattened along with everything else*.

With this flattening of the world, creation has become unhinged from the Creator; the cosmos which He made and ordered is no longer based in supernatural realities, but rather it has become a *merely natural universe which makes perfect sense without God*.

*So why does this matter for the Church?*

Because I can't help but wonder if our ministry work makes perfect sense without God, too.

And I can't help but wonder whether our ministry work is unintentionally feeding the doubt that *leads people away from Christ* because we, too, have bought into the myth of a flattened universe where God is, at best, a good idea.



Rather than seeing the Church as the real yet mystical presence of Christ's own Body on earth, I can't help but wonder whether our ministry is "institutionalizing" young people, teaching them that the

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“ HAVE WE BOUGHT INTO THE MYTH OF A FLATTENED, PURELY PHYSICAL UNIVERSE THAT MAKES PERFECT SENSE WITHOUT GOD? AND DOES OUR MINISTRY WORK PERPETUATE THIS IDEA? ”

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Church is a *mere human organization* that leads programs and activities that make perfect sense without God.

To the extent that God fits in with our model of ministry, I can't help but wonder if we see Him more as an idea we need to agree with rather than a person we need to encounter.

*I wonder if we have flattened what the Church actually is.*

I can't help but wonder whether young people find it so easy to fall away from the Church because we've made the lived experience of Christianity flat and empty, a collection of activities and programs that don't ever lead to an

encounter with the living God, a God who would surprise us with His presence and shatter the possibility of the empty, purely physical universe that we all (including those of us who lead ministry) take for granted.



Doubt, riding on the coattails of immanence, has become a staple of the modern religious experience, something that we in the Church unintentionally fuel.

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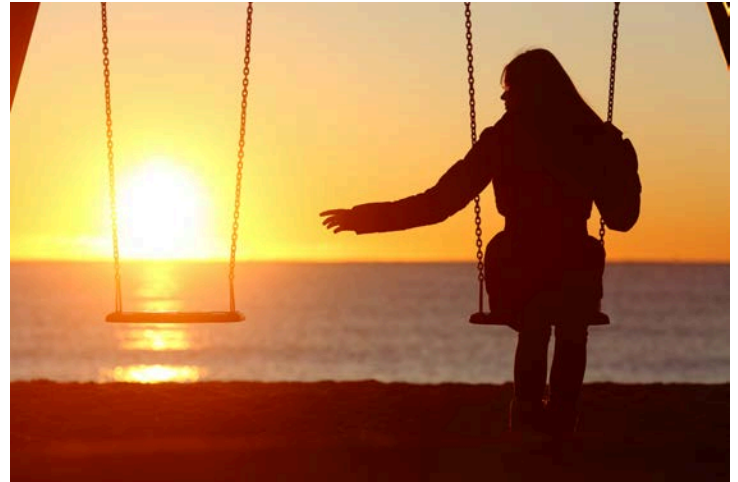
“ DOES OUR MINISTRY WORK LEAD TO  
AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE LIVING  
GOD? ”

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We have cut ourselves off from Christ's Body and therefore from one another as members of His Body, and all this makes for a very cold, lonely, and *isolated* existence.

## THE CHALLENGE OF LONELINESS

But this isolation isn't just in our heads, the intellectual byproduct of an amorphous (and uncertain) religious landscape. It's a very real thing that affects our sense of self and community.



The health insurer Cigna recently conducted a study of 200,000 adults which revealed that loneliness is far more than a problem; *it's an epidemic*.

Here's some of what they found:

- 46% of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone.
- 43% of Americans say they sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they are isolated from others.
- 20% report that they rarely or never feel close to people.
- Only 18% say they feel like they have people in their lives they can talk to.
- 53% of Americans report having meaningful in-person social interactions on a daily basis (things like having an extended conversation with a friend, spending quality time with family, etc.).



Perhaps most surprising for our purposes, the study found that Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) are the loneliest generation of all.

*So why does this matter for the Church?*

Because so much of what we call “ministry” centers on programs and activities, and people defend this ministry model by arguing that it at least brings people together in the Church.



But I can't help but wonder whether it isn't a *real* coming together; that this isn't real Christian fellowship, where two or more are gathered in the Lord's name.

I can't help but wonder whether our ministry programs and events are doing a far better job of helping people pass the time than *make the most of the time*: offering diversions and entertainment rather than facilitating honest and vulnerable encounters with God first (and with one another second).

I can't help but wonder whether this is why so many coffee hours are so *full* of small talk and so *empty* of genuine communion, which is why so

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“ DOES OUR MINISTRY WORK  
ACTUALLY PERPETUATE OUR  
SEPARATION AND LONELINESS? ”

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many young adults report feeling so alone in even the most crowded social hall.

Loneliness has become a *chronic modern problem*, something that is exacerbated by the way we do ministry. And the more young people feel adrift and on their own, the more they feel *uncertain* about what their lives are actually for.

## THE CHALLENGE OF UNCERTAINTY

In my experience, one of the biggest challenge that young people face is *a deep uncertainty about their lives*.

I don't mean this in the big-picture sense of doubt or cosmic questions about whether or not God is real.

I mean something far more down-to-earth.

Very real questions like “Who am I? Why am I here? What is my lifetime for?” bubble to the surface when all divine presence is pushed aside or dismissed altogether. When we forget the God in whose image we are created, we forget ourselves, resulting in *deep existential uncertainty*.



This uncertainty can manifest in relatively small ways, where a young person doesn't quite know how (or *why*) to fast or pray. And it can



manifest in larger ways, where a young person doesn't know what to look for in a potential spouse or what kind of career (much less a *vocation*) to pursue.

*So why does this matter for the Church?*

Because many ministry activities are great at enticing young people to *show up*, and people defend this model by arguing that our primary goal should be to keep kids “in Church,” even if that means prioritizing cultural and athletic activities over “spiritual” pursuits.



But I can't help but wonder whether our ministry efforts are designed for young people to remain passive recipients of “ministry” rather than become active participants in the life of the Church. As we've already noted above, these activities make people more a part of a “group” than members of Christ's very Body.

I can't help but wonder whether this is why Christianity is becoming more an abstract thing we believe and less *a concrete way of life*.

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“ DOES OUR MINISTRY WORK HELP  
GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE THE CONCRETE  
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LIVE AS CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD?

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Perhaps this is why it's easier to *identify* as Christians because of our religious upbringing, rather than *actually be* Christians through engaging an ancient set of practices that bring us into deeper and truer communion with the living God.

I can't help but wonder whether the less we emphasize lived and embodied practices, the more young people's lives and hearts are open to the formative practices that lead them further away from Christ and His Church.

*What exactly are these practices?*

We'll explore them in Part III.

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- We can't minister to people in our "secular age" unless we first understand the major challenge people face today
- In our "secular age," the key challenges that people face (especially young people) are those of doubt, loneliness, and uncertainty
- Our ministry work may actually be feeding the doubts that lead people away from Christ and his Church
- Our ministry work may actually be feeding the loneliness that leads people away from each other in the Church
- Our ministry work may actually be feeding the uncertainty that leaves people unprepared to live as Christians in the world

## Part III:

# Three Practices to Counteract the Challenges of Young Adulthood

### USING THE POSITIVE TO COUNTERACT THE NEGATIVE

Modern psychology, following the wisdom of the Church Fathers, offers guidance on ways to respond to negative thoughts with positive ones. For example, if a person is struggling with thoughts of *jealousy*, this can be combated with thoughts of *gratitude*: the mind can be directed away from what it lacks and refocus on what it has been given by God.

And this becomes an opportunity for thanksgiving and deeper communion with God and neighbor.



In a similar way, the challenges of doubt, loneliness, and uncertainty *aren't necessarily problems*. With the right mindset, we can turn them into *opportunities for Christ-centered ministry* that will invite people into a deeper experience of God and His Kingdom.

To do this, we need to counteract the tendencies that push people into these negative directions with practices that lead people back into positive directions that point the way to the Lord.

*Specifically:*

- We can counteract *doubt* with the practices of *faith*.
- We can counteract *loneliness* with the practices of *fellowship*.
- And we can counteract *uncertainty* with the practices of *vocation*.

## THE PRACTICES OF FAITH

Doubt can lead young Christians to question God's very existence, to see the world as cold and empty and meaningless.

When asking how we can reorient our lives in a direction of faith, the question becomes: *what kind of practices can help us to see God as present (and active) in the world?*



The Scripture points us in the right direction, advising us: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Cultivating a spirit of stillness and silence helps open our hearts to the Lord's presence.

We make silence an important part of every BeeTreat we offer, and it's no wonder that participants find it to be such a powerful experience that calms their hearts and reassures them by bringing them into greater awareness of the presence of God.

Imagine if this were a bigger part of the way we do ministry. Imagine if, rather than lecture young people every chance we get, we simply sat with them in quiet contemplation. Imagine if we prayed with them, not simply in a rushed or formal sense, but in a deeply intentional sense: if ministry workers took twenty minutes to sit with people in silence, and even taught them how to fill that silence with prayer.



Yet the practices of faith seem to make us uncomfortable. In fact, *they're often something for which we offer apologies*.

At many youth ministry events, for example, you'll see a leader announce that we are going to “pray really quick” before we “get to the fun stuff.” And behind the scenes, the leaders who plan an event often worry about making things “too spiritual” or “too churchy.”

When we do this, we suggest that prayer and communion with God *isn't a good enough reason to gather*; that it's, at best, secondary. But maybe we should have faith ourselves that gathering together with the express

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“ WHAT IF WE ACTED AS IF COMMUNION WITH GOD IS A GOOD ENOUGH REASON TO GATHER, AND EMBRACED THE OPPORTUNITY TO SIT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN SILENCE? ”

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purpose of prayer is *more than enough of a reason to gather*, and that no “fun activity” is needed to make this a night worth attending.

(After all, if our goal is merely to offer fun activities to bring people together, we are fighting an uphill battle against the world. The world will *always* have more fun than we can offer.)



Credit: Dmitry Ryzhkov, Flickr

Yet we focus on fun because we're ultimately *unsure about whether the presence of God is enough to make an event worthwhile*. We doubt. And so, rather than facilitate experiences that deepen faith, we create programs and events that *deepen unhealthy doubt* and lead people *further away from faith*.



But imagine if doubt was a thing we were comfortable acknowledging and addressing. What if we responded to doubt, not with judgment or shame, but *with bowed heads and fervent supplication*? Imagine if we modeled for young people the instinct to offer all things,

whether joyful or sorrowful, to God in His infinite mercy. Imagine if we were a people who constantly had prayer on our lips and in our hearts, both the wise words of the services and the authentic and spontaneous outpouring of prayer in our own words.



Imagine if we intentionally gathered *for the express purpose of crying out to God*: commending ourselves, one another, and our whole, shared life to Christ. Indeed, this shared, communal act would bridge the gap into true fellowship that combats our deepest loneliness.

## **PUTTING FAITH INTO PRACTICE**

Here are some simple ways you can begin implementing the practices of faith:

- Incorporate intentional quiet time into programs or events
- Lead young people in a silence workshop designed to help them clear their minds of distraction and prepare for more focused prayer
- Don't rush or unintentionally diminish prayer by making it seem like a chore or afterthought

Note: We'll be exploring this in more detail in our upcoming course, Effective Christian Ministry.



# THE PRACTICES OF FELLOWSHIP

Loneliness can lead young Christians to retreat inward, *isolating themselves from their brothers and sisters in Christ*. And when the Church offers nothing to heal their loneliness, it can lead them to abandon the Church altogether, choosing instead to find a place in other communities where they can be known and understood more intimately.

When asking how we can reorient our lives in a direction of fellowship, the question becomes: *what kind of practices can help us to truly open our lives to each other in the Lord's name?*



Again, the Scripture points us in the direction, reminding us that, when we feel trapped in our isolation and despair, a welcoming ear can make all the difference: “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.” (Psalm 34:4).

If God gives us His ear, we also should lend an ear to our brothers and sisters.

We make listening an important part of every BeeTreat we offer, and it’s powerful to hear how many young people are comforted by the simple experience of being heard, a thing that is far too rare in their lives.

Yet the practices of fellowship *seem to make us uncomfortable*.

At many youth ministry events, for example, you'll see an emphasis on extroverted experiences that are *bold* and *intense*. And when we promote these programs and events, we tend to highlight these large and loud gatherings as the centerpiece of what ministry offers.



When we do this, we suggest that a deeper sort of connection with our fellow Christians *isn't a priority*. But maybe we should have faith ourselves that gathering together with the express purpose of knowing others and being known by others in the Lord's name is *more than enough of a reason to gather*, and that no "party" is needed to make this a night worth attending.

(After all, if our goal is merely to offer a superficial fellowship, we are fighting an uphill battle against the world. The world will *always* throw better parties than we can.)

Yet we focus on big and loud group activities because *we're ultimately unsure* about whether coming together in the Lord's name is enough to make an event worthwhile. And, rather than facilitate experiences that deepen our connection with each other, we create programs and events

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“ WHAT IF WE ACTED AS IF  
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where people get lost in activities that, while potentially enjoyable, *aren't life-giving*.

But imagine if loneliness were a thing we were comfortable acknowledging and addressing. What if we responded to loneliness, not with distractions or diversions, but with *vulnerability and face-to-face encounters*?



Imagine if the Church offered, not simply opportunities to pass the time, but encounters where people could *make the most of the time* they spent with each other. Imagine if we taught people how to listen to each other, to really be present for the people in their lives: not simply physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well, with every aspect of their being.



Imagine if we acknowledged *just how many of us are lonely*. Imagine if we responded to this loneliness, not with indifference or denial, not by avoiding the pain through fun diversions, but rather by actively creating spaces in which we felt safe to be vulnerable, *to truly be known*, by our fellow

parishioners. Imagine if we modeled for young people the presence and attention that is a necessary element of any genuine community, a place where people can *share their joys and sorrows*.

A place where people can be *truly known in a spirit of Christ-centered, unconditional love*.

Imagine if young people really felt that the Church was a place where they knew they could bring all their fears, doubts, and questions, so that they were *confident* that no matter what uncertainty they carried about their lives, they wouldn't have to face that uncertainty by themselves.

## **PUTTING FELLOWSHIP INTO PRACTICE**

Here are some simple ways you can begin implementing the practices of fellowship:

- Use small groups to facilitate face-to-face encounters
- Learn how to actively listen to the young people in your care, and teach them to actively listen to each other

Note: We'll be exploring this in more detail in our upcoming course, Effective Christian Ministry.





# THE PRACTICES OF VOCATION

Uncertainty can lead young Christians to stall, *to stagnate in their lives and spiritual development*. Without concrete direction, young people simply won't know how to live as

Christians in the world on a daily and ongoing basis. And this uncertainty can lead them *to seek direction from other sources*, whether they be self-help programs or other religious traditions.



Once again, Scripture points us in the right direction, emphasizing the need for clear next steps to help guide the lives of young people: “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray” (Proverbs 22:6).

The Office of Vocation & Ministry (who bring the Church incredible ministry work like the CrossRoad Summer Institute) has a fantastic model for helping young people find their place as Christians in the world. They define vocation as “one’s unique and ongoing response to Christ’s call to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the neighbor as oneself.”

It’s a definition we’ve really taken to heart with our ministry work at Y<sup>2</sup>AM, especially our development of ministry resources like the Y<sup>2</sup>AM Ministry Plan. And it’s something we try to live out as we engage with the culture in Pop Culture Coffee Hour, wrestle with deep questions of



belonging in We are Orthodoxy, and creatively bring timeless theology into our cultural context with video series like Be the Bee.

Yet the practices of vocation *seem to make us uncomfortable*.

In many communities, for example, you'll often find an over-reliance on *vague statements*, exhortations to “pray more” and “fast more” without *concrete direction* on how to do that. And you'll find a tendency to explore spiritual matters in abstract and theoretical terms rather than through *actions and habits* that can be applied in different situations.



But imagine if uncertainty were a thing we were comfortable acknowledging and addressing. What if we responded to uncertainty, not by encouraging passivity and silence, but by *encouraging people to take risks and find ways they can best offer their talents to the glory of God?*



Imagine if the Church *offered young people a clear vision* of who they are and what their lives are for. This would mean that the Church would give not simply vague statements about Christianity, but *concrete guidance* on how each person can best live as a Christian. Imagine if we really

saw the Church as a Body made of many members, each of which play a unique, valuable, and distinctly indispensable role in the life of the whole.

Imagine if we invited young people into *positions of responsibility where* they could explore their talents and actively discern God's call. Imagine if we encouraged people to be *creative and courageous* as they try to figure out what gifts God has given them, and how best to use those gifts for the life of the world. Imagine if Christianity weren't just a thing that was an important part of our lives, but rather *the whole of our lives*, where nothing is more important than our relationship with Christ and our walk into the Kingdom.

## **PUTTING VOCATION INTO PRACTICE**

Here are some simple ways you can begin implementing the practices of vocation:

- Invite young people to take on meaningful roles and responsibilities in the community
- Offer encouragement and unwavering support when young people “fail” so they can develop the resilience to continue their spiritual struggle within the embrace of the Church
- Give young people clear guidance specifically tailored to their unique needs and struggles

Note: We'll be exploring this in more detail in our upcoming course, Effective Christian Ministry.

# Conclusion

A flawed vision of ministry has disrupted the spiritual lives of multiple generations. Yet, while many young people are falling away from Orthodoxy, many others are finding their way into the Church.

And these trends are closely related: just as people fall away because of a lack of spiritual mentorship and experience, they are drawn to the Church precisely because of those factors.

Young people struggle with three particular challenges that are hallmarks of our “secular age”: doubt, loneliness, and uncertainty. And the best way for us, as a Church, to respond to these challenges is with practices that counteract these negative trends: specifically the practices of faith, fellowship, and vocation.



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