

Book Review: *Why They Left*  
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*Why They Left* by Flavil Yeakley Jr., Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 2012, 224 pp., ISBN: 10:0-89225-593-5. \$18.99.

Flavil Yeakley Jr., has been a researcher and statistician for more than 40 years. After three semesters at Abilene Christian University, he dropped out and went into full-time ministry at the age of 19. Seventeen years and six state universities after attending Abilene, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Houston. He later went on to earn a masters and Ph. D. in speech communication.

The book begins with a foreword by Howard Norton and a preface written by the author. It contains two major parts. Part one gives some background about the churches of Christ and consists of three chapters that discuss a brief history of the churches of Christ, patterns of growth and decline and communication with those who left. Part two consists of nine chapters that record the results of a survey taken by Yeakley. The survey is not scientific in the strict sense. It consists of responses from 325 individuals who left the church of Christ. The reasons why they left serve as the thesis of the book. Individuals left for various reasons including: doctrinal deviations, misunderstandings, neglect, failure to fit in, and failed faith. The notes for each chapter are placed at the end of the book. The book is not indexed.

In chapter one, Yeakley covers very briefly some history of the churches of Christ. He states that churches of Christ are “heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement” and he mentions that Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (instrumental) and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are also heirs of this movement (p. 15). Yeakley fails to mention that the church of Christ has its origin on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) A. D. 30. Yeakley would have us believe that the church of Christ began as a result of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement (19<sup>th</sup> century).

Some interesting statistical facts about the churches of Christ appear in the chapter. First, churches of Christ are ranked 12<sup>th</sup> among religious bodies in the United States by the number of adherents (members and their families). They are ranked first among major religious groups in the United States by attendance as a percentage of the reported number of adherents (76.4). Among all the congregations of the churches of Christ, 36.6 percent have fewer than 50 members; 63.3 percent have fewer than 100 members (p. 18). While 11 denominations have more adherents than churches of Christ, 238 denominations have fewer adherents than churches of Christ (p. 19). Churches of Christ rank 4<sup>th</sup> among Christian religious bodies in the United States in the number of congregations. In 2000, there were 13,027 congregations. The states with the largest number of adherents are Texas (22.4%); Tennessee (13.2%); and Alabama (7.2%). Churches of Christ ranked 5<sup>th</sup> among major Christian religious bodies in the United States according to the number of counties in which each had a presence (p. 21). Churches of Christ ranked 1<sup>st</sup> among major Christian religious bodies in America ranked by the number of adherents per county in which that group has a presence as an indication of how evenly that group is spread throughout the nation in relation to the size of each group (p. 22).

Yeakley presents an accurate picture of the church of Christ as a nondenominational religious group. It is neither a sect nor a denomination (pp. 24-26).

Chapter two is titled, “Studying Patterns of Growth and Decline.” In this chapter, Yeakley, asserts, “The religious climate has changed” (p. 29). He spoke of the religious climate in America. Growth rates of the fastest growing religious groups in America have declined. He illustrates this with the Assemblies of God. In the 1970’s, this religious group had a growth rate of 70 percent. In the 1980’s, it was only 35 percent. In the 1990’s, it was 18.5 percent. From 1990 to 2000 the churches of Christ grew at a rate of 2.7 percent. From 2003 to 2009, the growth rate for churches of Christ declined by 4.0 percent in the number of congregations, 4.1 percent in the number of members and 4.7 percent in the number of adherents (p.33).

He also addresses the number of high school graduates among members of churches of Christ who attend Christian colleges (35.5%--p. 37). The divorce rate among members of the church of Christ is 25-30 percent (p. 38). The retention rates for young people among churches of Christ for the years 1997 to 2006: 58.2 percent are still members; 21.1 percent have joined some other religious group and 20.7 percent have no present religious affiliation (p. 39). “Among more than 2,500 alumni of eleven Christian colleges and universities, 85.1 percent are still members of the Churches of Christ” (p. 39). Yeakley mentions three factors that influence retention rates: (1) the presence of an active youth ministry; (2) a challenging adult Bible class curriculum; and (3) the level of parental attendance and involvement in the church (p. 40).

In chapter three, Yeakley addresses the topic of *authentic dialogue*. He begins by discussing the importance of communication. He shows some of the types of bad communication. Communication that is used to trick, deceive, or manipulate is detrimental. Communication that treats others as a mere audience, not unique individuals is bad. Authentic dialogue, on the other hand, seeks to understand and be understood. It is open, honest, and free from manipulation. Yeakley includes the following principles of authentic dialogue. First, it begins with the conviction that absolute truth is possible, knowable, and propositional. Second, it involves humility. Third, it requires that each person accept the other without judging. He concludes the chapter with fourteen practices that will help facilitate authentic dialogue.

While Yeakley states that he did not intend to write concerning his opinions (p. 119), he then proceeds to do just that. Many of his opinions are controversial and some are wrong. Chapter four begins Part Two of the book that enters into some of the reasons given among those surveyed for leaving the church of Christ. This chapter deals with doctrinal differences and misunderstandings. Here are some of the topics addressed: “churches of Christ believe they are the only ones going to heaven”; “churches of Christ do not believe in salvation by grace through faith”; “churches of Christ teach that we cannot know that we are saved”; “churches of Christ do not believe in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit”; and restrictions regarding translations of Scripture. Yeakley states, “Translations are not inspired and do not claim to be” (p. 75). If we do not have the inspired word of God in the English language, we do not have a trustworthy and authoritative Bible.

Yeakley gives some of the results of the *anecdotal survey* taken. Eight of the 325 individuals surveyed converted to non-Christian religions including Judaism, Buddhism, Wicca, and paganism. 127 said that they have no religious affiliation. 24 of these (127) said they no longer believe in God. 53 left to join the Christian churches. 53 left to join community type churches. 84 others went to 23 different religious groups (pp. 75-76). In the material that follows this section, Yeakley fails to address the 127 (the largest group) and their reasons for leaving the churches of Christ (possibly secular humanism). He addresses the issue of homosexuality in the remainder of the chapter. Only six of the 325 respondents indicated that

they were homosexual. Yeakley does not believe that homosexual orientation is inborn (p. 79). He does believe that it is a sin.

Chapter five addresses the topic of neglect. Yeakley points out that some individuals do not form relationships within the congregation and feel left-out and neglected. He shows the value of mutual responsibility in relationship building by citing many of the one another passages in Scripture (p. 90-91). He emphasizes that church leaders should be focused on shepherding the flock and facilitating opportunities for people to feel connected and be engaged in the work of the church.

Chapter six is closely associated with the previous chapter as it addresses those who did not fit in. Yeakley focuses on analysis of a congregations' personality. He mentions two instruments of assessment. The first is the psychological types postulated by Carl Jung (p. 106-108). Second, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which identifies a person's personality type. Self-assessment can produce a better awareness of the congregations' personality and help bring about changes that will assimilate all kinds of people.

The doctrinal issue addressed in chapter seven is divorce and remarriage. Yeakley states that we must not do theology by opinion poll or popular vote (p. 119), but then freely gives his opinions on the topics he addresses in the book (p. 122, 128). He discusses the "no grounds for divorce position"; "the adultery as the only grounds for divorce issue"; and "a divorced fornicator cannot marry controversy." In this discussion, among other things, Yeakley states, "I do not believe that people who have divorced according to the laws of the land where they live or the customs of their culture are still married to each other in the sight of God. Furthermore, I do not believe that people who are married to each other according to the laws or customs of their culture are really "living in adultery" in the sight of God" (p. 128). Yeakley makes the laws of the state or culture supersede the law of God! This is a remarkable position. Later in the book he declares, "The exception language of Matthew 19:9 is a major challenge for those who believe that things other than adultery may break the covenant relationship and justify divorce" (p. 132). Yeakley's personal opinion conflicts with the absolute truth of God's Word. He sounds confused and unsure of the correct position. Is this one of those intellectual moments of which he spoke earlier, "What I do not believe is that I have absolutely perfect understanding of God's absolute truth and my perception of that truth. There is always a potential difference between God's absolute truth and my perception of that truth" (p. 60). Scripture states, "Wherefore, be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). Yeakley may not believe that he has to be correct in his understanding of God's will. He states, "Is it possible that God's grace may cover intellectual errors? I believe that it is" (p. 63). Could one be in doctrinal error and still be saved? If one could be in doctrinal error and still be saved on the divorce and remarriage issue, what about the homosexual issue?

Some left the churches of Christ because of leadership issues. Yeakley tackles this problem in chapter eight. Churches of Christ hold to a congregational type organizational structure. Each congregation is autonomous and there is no national headquarters or church councils that govern the local congregations. This differs from the Episcopalian structure and the Presbyterian structure. Issues involving church leaders are: who should appoint elders?; how long should elders serve and upon what grounds would they be dismissed?; and what role and work should elders do and what work should they delegate? Yeakley mentioned two reasons that ministers were leaving churches of Christ. The first problem was dealing with elders or church leaders. The second problem was inadequate financial support (p. 144).

Chapter nine focused on evangelism issues. The first issue was whether or not a member of the church of Christ was required to win others to Christ in order to be saved eternally. Yeakley correctly concludes that they do not. Evangelism should not resort to manipulation or use high pressure sales tactics to bring others to Christ. The best approach to evangelism is personal and relational where we can introduce people to the gospel of Christ in a loving and trusting relationship.

In chapter ten, the author addresses the issue of instrumental music. Yeakley's survey seems to point to 106 individuals leaving churches of Christ due to instrumental music. Churches of Christ do not use instrumental music in the worship assemblies because it is not authorized by the New Testament. Some congregations are changing their position on this issue due to the losses of members and adherents. *Churches of Christ in the United States*, a directory of churches of Christ, now lists 18 congregations that have made the doctrinal switch from a cappella to instrumental music. Yeakley minimizes the instrumental music issue. He states, "The instrumental music question is not as important as many other doctrines, but no doctrine or practice is really a "salvation issue" (p. 175). This statement is false. The teachings of Jesus Christ have equal binding power. One doctrine is not more binding than another doctrine. John writes, "Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son" (II John 9). Failure to abide in the doctrine of Christ will sever one from fellowship with God.

Yeakley takes up the discussion of the role of women in the church in chapter eleven. He shows that God has ordained male spiritual leadership in the home and in the church. While women are equal in participating in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, they have different roles in the kingdom of God. The roles and responsibilities of both men and women are ordained by God. Yeakley believes that women elders or preachers would be a violation of Bible teaching and not just one's opinion (p. 193).

The final chapter gives some lessons from listening to those who have left churches of Christ. Yeakley makes suggestions as to how congregations can improve in some areas without compromising doctrine. They can work to be less negative. They can teach a method of evangelism that includes open and authentic dialogue. They can be more Christ-focused than doctrine-focused. They can work better to assimilate new members and establish friendships that will keep people connected to the congregation. They can establish programs to help involve people in the ministry and work of the congregation.

Howard Norton wrote in the Foreword (p. 9-10) that we may not fully agree with every one of Flavil Yeakley's answers, but that he has opened up a dialog with those who have left churches of Christ that can be instructive to church leaders. The reader must sift thoroughly the pages of this book and separate the chaff from the wheat.