

Sunday: Thinking the Faith

By Bob Young

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“Americans Describe Their Ideal Church.” Barna reports constantly survey the ever-changing U.S. religious scene. Churches find it more and more difficult to reach out to their communities. In his book, *Thinking the Faith*, John Douglas Hall pointed out that historically, until the 1960s, most Americans attended the church of their parents. Hall observes that faith was not “thought” but inherited. In some religious groups, one is considered a member even before personal faith develops. Until about fifty years ago, any choice of churches was virtually arranged for most people at birth. People went to the church of their parents which was the same church their grandparents had attended. Church shopping was rare.

In times past, people changed churches when they moved, when the church went through a split, or when entering a “mixed marriage” — when two people from two different church backgrounds married and had to choose to attend his church, her church, or an entirely different church. Things have changed! Church or denominational loyalty is at an all-time low. According to Barna, each year more than one out of seven adults change their church affiliation, and another one out of six attend a carefully chosen handful of selected churches on a rotating basis rather than sticking with the same church week after week. Even though U.S. church membership in 2021 has fallen below 50% of the population for the first time, church remains an important aspect of life for millions of people. However, there is less concern about religious “brand loyalty” than there used to be.

“Thinking the faith” may be the biblical ideal, but increasing church mobility suggests that other factors are now involved in understanding how and why people choose churches. In a survey from a few years ago, when those who attend a church were asked about the most important factors, nine factors were significant. (The Barna research did not inquire about the things most important to the unchurched.)

The three most significant factors were the beliefs and teachings of the church, how the people in the church cared about each other, and the quality of the Bible teaching. Additional factors that were statistically significant but not of primary importance included friendliness to visitors, care for the poor, quality of programs and classes for children, personable preacher, denominational affiliation, and quality of the adult Bible classes.

For those of us who believe that biblical faith should be thought out, the news is not all bad. Two of the top three factors involved Bible teaching—content and quality. Worthy of note are the things missing from the list of important factors, especially with the current emphasis in many churches on worship music, small groups, inclusion, and the convenience and comfort of the building.