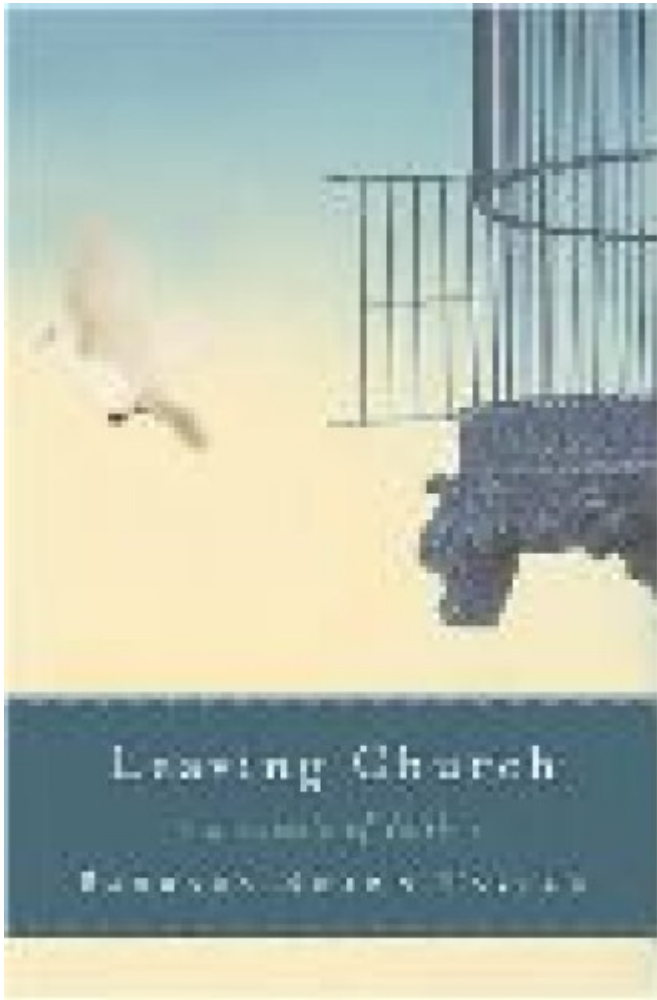


Leaving Church

reviewed by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith

Barbara Brown Taylor
HarperSanFrancisco

In her first book, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor delighted readers with a seamless sewing together of divinity school memories, scripture, and ruminations on

the beauty of the liturgical calendar and life in a congregation. That book inspired others to follow the call to ministry, as did the ten books that followed. An Episcopal priest with a writer's soul, Taylor is deservedly famous as a gifted preacher and interpreter of Christianity. So readers may be surprised that this book is about the joys of staying home on Sunday morning.

Taylor moves quickly from her childhood to life in seminary to her early years as a priest. From the beginning her mountaintop moments of ministry were tempered by the valleys. It was as an associate minister at a vibrant downtown Atlanta church that she first hit the wall, feeling spiritually depleted and distant from God. Longing for a pastoral life with more time to experience the holy, Taylor and her husband sought solace in the countryside and discovered a beautiful "doll house" church in Clarksville, Georgia. Through an apparent series of divine coincidences, she received a call to that very church.

In her account of falling in love with the church and of her anxieties in succeeding a beloved priest, Taylor describes the ordinary things of ministry and makes them extraordinary. No one does a better job of laying out the ups and downs of parish ministry in spare yet specific detail. She includes gentle jibes at annoying members and apt descriptions of petty church politics. Any high achiever will wince with self-recognition as she describes her combination of ambition and insecurity. She recalls how she worried when whispered conversations stopped suddenly in her presence—and then was surprised by the church's gift of two rocking chairs for her new front porch. This is Taylor at her best, writing about congregational moments with such artistic grace and wit that we see them afresh.

Nature lovers will soak in her story of the search for the perfect land upon which to build a house. *Leaving Church* is the story of a natural nester, who finds God and home in a piece of land. The book is sprinkled with references to all kinds of birds—from mother hens who love as God does to red-tailed hawks that, for her, replace the traditional dove as an image of the Holy Spirit. But early on we see what is coming: she uses the language of love for the church but reserves the language of passion for the land.

So it does not come as a shock that even in idyllic Clarksville her love for ministry again begins to dry up. Beneath the outward success, she suffered from her perfectionism, a desire to please all people, and the pressures of change in a growing church. Though attendance increased to the point where the church had to

hold four services each Sunday, tears poured down her face after services. It was time to leave the church after 20 years in ministry. But what would she do?

The answer came with an invitation to apply for a teaching position at nearby Piedmont College. The teaching post offered a chance to leave the ministry without leaving her beloved home or the land. Having resigned from the parish, free of the burden of the clerical collar and the clerical role, Taylor was able to attend a party where she could get tossed into the swimming pool along with everyone else. It felt like a rebaptism. Later, Taylor found herself playing out her priestly role while digging up potatoes: "I sank my hands into the scented earth and held each Yukon Gold up like a communion wafer." Yet it is a communion missing a congregation.

Taylor alludes to theological breakthroughs that encouraged her in leaving the church and that reminded her that there is a wide religious world out there. In her role as teacher, she says, "I met people of other faiths and of no faith at all who were doing more 'to do justice, and to love kindness' than many of us who know where to find that verse in the Bible. . . . I read books that had never shown up on any seminary reading list, which raised keen questions about the origins of Christianity and the veracity of scripture that I had never heard anyone address in church." But surely this was not the first time this Episcopal priest—an Emory religion major and a Yale Divinity graduate—faced questions about scriptural contradictions or about the complexity of Christian origins.

Taylor's account suggests that there was a straight line from the demands of parish ministry to the decision to leave parish ministry. Missing from this memoir is an important piece of the story: her life as a published author and nationally known speaker, especially after a Baylor University study named her one of the 12 top preachers in the English-speaking world. The only hint of this life outside the parish is an aside: "My reputation as a preacher grew."

In an interview with *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* in 2000, Taylor said: "The Baylor study ruined things for me in the parish. Busloads of people started arriving in a church that seats 82, and regular church members couldn't get seats. And pretty soon I was involved in celebrity preaching instead of parish ministry."

By leaving out that part of the story, Taylor oversimplifies her own leave-taking and misleadingly universalizes it. This part of the story also underscores a more general dilemma: though the church needs pastors like Taylor who can speak and write

about the local church, pastors with such gifts often get pulled into a wider world of speaking invitations, article assignments, book contracts, preaching conferences and yes, opportunities to teach. The reward for writing lovingly about parish ministry can be a ticket out.

Given this part of the story, Taylor's account of worrying about what else to do besides parish ministry rings a bit false. She lists as her likely career options working at a restaurant or a bookstore, but readers who know anything about her life will have trouble mustering up much concern for her fate. Many ministers face those options, but not Taylor. An invitation to apply for a newly endowed chair of world religions at a nearby college is not something that happens to most burnt-out clergy.

Coming from one of the best-loved preachers of our day, her words about ministry and faith will carry great weight, and they should. She has earned the right to reflect on the pastoral life. It will fall to others to show how depletion does not have to have the last word in the preaching life. It will fall to others to consider what might have sustained Taylor as an artist and writer within a congregation. It will fall to others to argue that lengthy committee meetings and the tedious details of parish ministry still offer a kind of spiritual richness that is even greater than catching sight of an eagle.

But it will not fall solely to others. I suspect that Taylor will be part of this conversation too. She does not storm out of the church slamming the door. She walks out talking, the door left ajar for more words to come through.