

Students Abandoning the Faith: Why It Happens and What We Can Do **By Chuck Edwards & John Stonestreet**

For over 45 years, Summit Ministries has been training students to face the challenges to their Christian faith by helping them navigate the world of ideas, answer the tough questions that often leave Christians speechless, and engage the significant cultural issues of our day from a biblical worldview.

A biblical worldview approach to life and learning has never been more needed than in today's pluralistic/postmodern culture. Christian students face hostility to their faith from one side, and apathy to anything of importance from the other side. Students re-entering American culture from the outside are particularly vulnerable, especially if they are unaware of the vast cultural changes that are waiting for them. Sadly, the casualties are high.

Decline in student spirituality

When it comes to the spiritual life of teenagers, the statistics are not very encouraging. According to a recent study by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, the number of students who frequently attend religious services drops by 23 percent after three years in college.¹ The research also confirms that 36 percent rated their spirituality *lower* after three years in college.

Another study, the "College Student Survey," asked students to indicate their current religious commitment. Comparing the responses of freshmen who checked the "born again" category with the answers they gave four years later, we find that on some campuses as high as 59 percent no longer describe themselves as "born again."² That's a fallout rate of almost two-thirds!

Recently, the Barna Group reported on the spiritual involvement of twenty-somethings. The findings: only 20 percent of students who were highly church-ed as teens remained spiritually active by age 29.³

However you factor it, these are significant numbers! Why are so many students walking away from their faith? Our own research and experience of working with teens suggests several reasons for this defection.

1. Increase in Liberal Professors

Frankly, many students fall prey to the anti-Christian rhetoric of their professors. That many professors disdain Christianity is not an alarmist myth. In fact, a study published by Gary Tobin of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research showed that in a sample of 1,200 college and university faculty, 53 percent held unfavorable feelings toward evangelical Christians while at the same time holding favorable opinions of most other religious groups. In addition, college and university faculty were far less likely to self-identify as Christian than the general public and are far more likely to refer to themselves as secular/liberal than as conservative/religious.⁴

Tobin's findings echo the results of an earlier survey of college faculty summarized in the March, 2005 issue of the *Washington Post*. The article revealed that 72 percent of professors and instructors in colleges across the U.S. are liberal.⁵ That's a marked increase from just 20 years ago, when those who identified themselves as liberal was only 39 percent. This figure is also in sharp contrast to a Harris poll that found that only 19 percent of the general public describe themselves as liberal.⁶

The *Post* article goes on to report that 51 percent of college faculty rarely or never attend church or synagogue, 84 percent are in favor of abortion, 67 percent accept homosexuality, and 65 percent want the government to ensure full employment!

No wonder students are bolting from a commitment to Christian ideas; they simply believe what they are being taught in class.

2. Lack of Adequate Grounding

Let's face it: many Christian students have no idea *why* they believe what they believe. When asked to defend the Christian faith against direct or indirect challenges, they are unable to do so. Further, without the ability to defend their faith, they may begin to falsely conclude that it is not defensible. This is

especially true of students raised in a Christian environment where they assume that they have “heard it all.”

However, it is not just direct attacks on their faith that require students to know *why* they believe what they believe. Living in the age of information presents two unique challenges to this generation of students. First, they encounter daily an overwhelming amount of information. Of course, information isn’t neutral; it contains, argues or embodies ideas. Students today swim in a deluge of information. Whether or not there is an absence of the true or the genuine, there is often an inability to find it amidst all the noise and distraction.

Second, they experience this information, with its inherent ideas, differently than previous generations. Information today (especially via the internet) comes without context, without a clear source, and often without a compelling narrative. Their lives look more like a random episode of *Seinfeld* than the start-to-finish *Cosby Show*. Today’s generation are not linear thinkers.

The result? In his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neal Postman argued, even before the advent of the Internet, that the West had become a silly culture. Entertainment had destroyed our ability to think. We lack the ability to evaluate and prioritize information.

In the Information Age it is essential that students are equipped to discern between competing ideas and respond with the truth. Paul warns his readers in Colossians 2, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy...” Many students, like many of the adults in their lives, lack discernment and thus are captives of false ideas.

3. A Wrong View of Christianity

Sometimes, students have a reaction against Christianity. There are a number of reasons for this: past hurts, moral failures or rebellion. On the other hand, some students simply just don’t *get* Christianity. In other words, they really don’t have a strong understanding of what Christianity actually *is*.

How is it that Christian students, who are so deeply engrossed in church culture and who have more access to the Bible, Christian literature, youth programs, and other resources than any generation that has lived since the founding of the Church, can be so confused about the central doctrines of Christianity and why they matter? How is it that this generation possesses such a truncated, neutered view of the Gospel of the Kingdom? How is it that they just don’t “get it”?

The disconnect between true Christianity and what teens believe is dramatically revealed in a recent book, titled, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, written primarily by Christian Smith, a University of North Carolina sociologist. Smith and his colleagues conducted the largest survey to date of teens’ religious beliefs. Based on these extensive interviews, Smith writes that many students who claim to be Christians believe a host of ideas that are not anything close to orthodox Christianity. What they *actually* believe is something Smith identifies as “moralistic therapeutic deism.”⁷ On this view, the only point of faith is to be good, to feel good, and to have a God to always call on for help without expecting anything in return. This is a far cry from a biblical view of God and our relationship to Him.

Reversing the Trend

As parents, educators, and church leaders, what can we do to keep our young people from dropping out of church or converting to the “no longer born again” category?

First, we must understand that the battle is for the hearts *and* minds of students. For too long many churches have been content to focus on the emotions, shying away from a serious discipleship of the mind. Yet, Jesus said that loving God involves both heart *and* head (Matthew 12:29-30). And Paul, in Romans 12:1-2, insisted that serving God involves renewing the mind.

Second, our instruction should revolve around the fact that Christianity is a robust faith. This means that when it comes to life’s most pressing issues, we have answers that are superior to all other philosophies. As the Apostle Paul put it, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.”⁸ To

demolish an argument, we must have a *better* argument! This means Christians must think well, and hard and long.

Third, we must teach students that Christianity is a comprehensive world and life view. A biblical worldview seeks to explain the reality of God's truth in *every* area: from philosophy and science, ethics and economics, to psychology, sociology, law and, yes, even politics. In this way, no matter what course in school a student takes, he or she will be able to discern when the professor is presenting an anti-biblical bias.

Finally, parents and teachers must commit to developing a Christian worldview themselves. Students who see a Christian worldview being lived out through their parents and teachers are much more likely to embrace that view for themselves and to stand strong when that worldview is under attack.

With biblically-based convictions firmly etched in their minds, Christian students will be prepared not only to withstand the attacks on their faith, but also they will be in a better position to help their friends understand God's truth, and even make a positive contribution to shaping society for God's glory.

With this kind of preparation, the downward spiral of spirituality can be reversed. And when future surveys are taken, more students will respond on the positive side of the spiritual ledger.

Endnotes:

- 1 Quoted in the report, Preliminary Findings on Spiritual Development and the College Experience: A Longitudinal Analysis (2000-2003).
Online article: http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/results/Longitudinal_00-03.pdf
- 2 Taken from the "College Student Survey." Cooperative Institutional Research Program, U.C.L.A.
Online article: http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/css_po.html.
- 3 George Barna, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years." (www.barna.org)
- 4 Gary A. Tobin and Aryeh K. Weinberg, Profiles of the American University, Vol. 2: Religious Beliefs and Behaviors of College Faculty. Institute for Jewish and Community Research, 2007.
- 5 "College Faculties A Most Liberal Lot, Study Finds," By Howard Kurtz, Washington Post, Tuesday, March 29, 2005; Page C01.
- 6 THE HARRIS POLL® #8, February 13, 2002, Party Identification: Democrats Still Lead, But Their Lead (5 Points) Is As Low As It Has Ever Been.
Online article: http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=285
- 7 Christian Smith, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (Oxford, 2005).
- 8 2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV).

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