

Why College Students Are Really Leaving the Church

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I've read several articles on the subject of "Why the youth leave the church." Usually the articles give reasons such as, "They were never really saved," or "they were never taught the importance of fellowship," or "they weren't disciplined," and the lists go on. While I don't think the points made in the articles are incorrect, I do believe most of the lists are incomplete and do not adequately address one of the biggest reasons people leave the church after high school.

It may be that, because they grew up in a culture that was friendlier to Christianity, church leaders don't realize the need to prepare students for the intellectual challenges to Christianity in a deep way. Regardless, as someone who is much closer to college age than middle age I need to point out a harsh, possibly offensive reality:

Most churches – probably yours – have done and are doing a terrible job teaching people, especially youth, *why* they should believe Christianity is true. A lot of churches do a great job of teaching what the Bible says, but that does no good if a person does not believe or is later convinced that the Bible is not a supernaturally inspired book!

Now, this article is no attack on my pastors or youth pastor. I imagine they did what they knew how to do and taught what they thought was important and followed the examples that they had. I would imagine that a lot of what I will say might be "greek" to you. But times have changed and I promise you that your under-30 crowd is dealing with these issues.

Your youth-group kids are going to enter a college-world (if not a high school) that is openly hostile to the Christian faith. Be assured, your students will be challenged to defend – using evidence – every aspect of their faith. And most Christians, regardless of age, don't know what the

evidence is; and many of those who do, don't know how to explain it.

As I see it, there seem to be two options which are regularly tried:

1. Try to convince students and parents (for those youths in your church who are lucky enough to have Christian parents) to go to private Christian high schools and colleges where they will be sheltered for a few more years or home-school.

2. Try to convince the youth of your church who choose to go to secular schools to avoid the parties and find a church. Hope and pray for the best even though statistically 60–70% won't be seen in a church again.

I would like to suggest to you a third option:

3. Give them the strong, battle-tested armor they need so no matter where they go they will be prepared to withstand all attacks and be effective witnesses for Jesus Christ.

Greg Kokul – a great defender of the faith – compares learning Christian apologetics (rational, clear and complete arguments like a lawyer would make) is like putting on a bullet-proof vest. However, the only way a company or a police officer can put complete trust in that vest is to put it on a stand and shoot bullets at it. If a bullet gets through, then that area of the vest needs to be examined and reinforced.

Too many times, Christians only listen to teachers or learn from those with whom they already agree. We like to feel like the smartest people in the room and we like to be confirmed. That is just a fact of life. For example, I would bet almost everyone reading this who watches cable news has a particular news channel that they watch almost exclusively because “the other news people are biased.” What you really mean is that you disagree with the political point of view of the commentators on the other channel and you don’t want to hear what they have to say.

We have the same problem in Christianity, only worse. There is often strong opposition to listening to speakers or teachers who are decidedly *for* us and *for* Christ and *for* the gospel just because they are part of another denomination! If we won’t listen to allies, then we certainly won’t listen to opposition, and, therefore, will be wholly unprepared to teach others why they should believe that God is real, what the Bible says is true and why our *interpretation* of it is the best doctrine.

It’s easy to be confident in your own rightness when you shut out all disagreement.

You can’t shut out disagreement in the college classroom.

You can’t shut out disagreement in the workplace.

We equip students with vests made of all sorts of “what we believe” materials, but the armor plating of “why we believe it” is missing. Then we send them off, heads held high, into a battlefield of intellectual snipers who are great at finding any weakness in the armor. Next week, I’ll discuss three major “weak spots” in Christian education.

This kind of argument is not the kind of “apologia” mentioned in scripture. God always backed Himself up with evidence.

Cracks in the Armor:

While the motivations of those doing the questioning varies, it has been my experience that Christianity is tried in three major areas; and the truth is, a lot of times the skeptic has **valid points** that deserve deep, caring answers and not clever one-liners.

Area #1: The problem of evil.

If you can’t sympathize with people who find this to be a problem, then you just aren’t thinking or you’ve never had any real tragedy in your life. The argument is usually something like this:

“Christians believe in an all-loving, all-powerful God, and yet we see horrible suffering around the world. Infants and children starve to death every day. Innocents are slaughtered. Babies are stillborn. Natural disasters kill thousands. Groups like ISIS rape, kill and enslave. Now, if God is so loving *and* so powerful, why does he let this continue? You say it has to do with free-will and people choosing to do wrong things, but God didn’t have to make a world like this in the first place. Didn’t he *know* how terrible it would be? And then, some of these people, after living horrible lives and never even hearing about Jesus, God then sends them to Hell for eternity! It seems to make a lot more sense that if there is a god, at best he doesn’t care or at worst is actually malicious.”

Area #2: What we observe in science contradicts the Bible.

There are definitely some valid points made in these arguments, especially against particular schools of creationism. All Christians ought to learn, with an **open** mind the strengths and weaknesses **both** scientifically and textually, of young-earth creationism, gap theory, day-age creationism, framework theory and theistic evolution. However, if you are not willing to learn from the proponents of each view, then don’t bother. Belief systems should be judged fairly by the best they have to offer and not just by their critics. At any rate, the argument that what we can clearly observe contradicts the Bible usually contains elements such as:

“Doesn’t the Bible say that the universe is only 6,000 years old? We can easily disprove that! The only reason cell phones, space travel and atomic bombs work is because we have calculated the speed of light. We know that galaxies really are millions of light-years away. We saw a star explode that was 114,000 light years away. When was that supposed to have happened if not 114,000 years ago? You say God can make anything look like anything He wants? If that is how He operates, then no evidence

counts for the Bible any more than it does for the Quran or the Book of Mormon. Is outer space just a big illusion? Am I really supposed to believe that the megalodon giant shark, the deep sea creatures with razor-sharp teeth and the tyrannosaurus all lived 6,000 years ago and that they were herbivores! No death before sin, right? I can't look at evidence because sin messes up my logic? Well what about your logic? We are about to land a satellite on a comet that is 219 million miles away and hurtling through space at 64,000 mph. Obviously, we can calculate something correctly using our minds.”

Would any of these questions make you uncomfortable? I know they certainly struck a chord with me. How would you answer them? Do you need to do some studying?

Area #3: Christians are immoral and judgmental.

These arguments are the ones we see most commonly in the news media and pop culture, and like the others, they should be taken seriously. Sometimes they sound like:

“Why are you Christians so against two people who genuinely care about each other spending the rest of their lives together just because they are of the same gender? Why can't people just be who they are inside? It isn't hurting you, so why don't you just stay out of it? Why should we all have to abide by morals written thousands of years ago? Even you Christians have changed. Men and women used to wear robes to the floor to be modest. You certainly don't do that anymore! You talk about things prohibited in the Old Testament, but you eat ham! Also, how many people have been killed in the name of Christ? Jesus said not to judge.”

I Peter 3:15 (NASB) says, “...*always being ready to make a defense (apologia: a legal term like the defense a lawyer would make) to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence...*”

This verse needs to be fulfilled now more than ever. I beg you to honestly consider how prepared you are to address some of the arguments I've listed. It could be that you are very unprepared. It could be that you might need to learn from people with whom you think you disagree.

But I would ask you to put yourself in the shoes of your young people and imagine being faced with these sorts of questions.

My freshman year at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, I **thought I knew** why people ought to believe the Bible. I had watched Dr. Dino, and he made minced-meat of the arguments non-believers would have. I was in a BMA church every time the doors were open since birth! I was prepared.

Wrong!

I wasn't prepared at all. I had only been given a caricature of what other people believed, thought and felt. I had only been taught from a narrow perspective and didn't even know that other schools of interpretation existed within conservative, Bible-believing Christianity.

The worst part is, I am pretty sure I drove people further away from Christ by my ignorance-fueled arrogance and the “apologetics” I had been taught. I wish I could go back in time and do it all over again.

What will you do to make your youth more prepared than I was?

Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, I have dedicated my life to contending for the faith in the arena of thought. I have a great list of resources on these subjects and would love to talk with you or your youth. For more information, visit lifeinprogressministries.com.

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