The Back Door Is Open

In my world religions class at a Christian university, I was talking to two students, both of whom were Wiccan. Kathy, one of the Wiccans, was raised in a good Christian church but had many reservations about the Bible. Her college roommate, also a Wiccan, convinced her that Christianity was not true. Eventually, Kathy walked away from Christianity and became a Wiccan convert.

I told Kathy that Christianity is the one credible faith and that no other religion could stand up to it in terms of logic and evidence. I asked her to listen in class with an open mind and let the evidence alone convince her. Sadly, Kathy is not alone in her departure from the church. The hard truth is that we are seeing a large number of our young people walk away from the church and abandon the faith by the time they leave college. Many of these never return.

Christian Young People Are Going AWOL

Recent studies reveal the staggering number of young people who are dropping out of church. A 2006 study by the Barna Group found that 6 out of 10 twentysomethings were involved in church during their teen years but no longer attended church (Barna Group 2006). The Barna research showed that teenagers’ religious activity is not translating into spiritual commitment as adults in their 20s and 30s. A 2007 LifeWay Research survey showed that 70% of young adults who attended a Protestant church for at least a year in high school stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22 (McConnell 2007). Why is this happening—and what can we do to stop this mass exodus?

Why Are Young People Dropping Out?

LifeWay Research wanted to know why young people abandon church. They found that 97% of the “dropouts” listed life-change issues as a reason they left church. However, there must be something else going on. Lifestyle changes alone cannot explain the large exodus of young people from the church.

Britt Beemer of America’s Research Group was commissioned to find out more about those who are leaving the church. Beemer felt that the answers given in previous research were too shallow and decided to dig deeper (Ham, Beemer, and Hillard 2009, 30). He surveyed 1,000 people aged 20 to 29 who said that they attended an evangelical church nearly every week when growing up but never or seldom go today.

Beemer probed beneath the surface answers of “lifestyle changes” and asked questions of belief. Is biblical belief at the root of the exodus from the church, as it was for Kathy? Interestingly enough, the majority of these church dropouts held to a strong belief in God, and 66% believed they were saved and would go to heaven when they died (178). However, most of them felt that the Bible was not a credible document. When asked if they thought the Bible contained errors, 40% of respondents said yes, 30% did not know, and only 30% said no (170).

Now we are getting somewhere! The primary reason young people are abandoning the church is not a matter of lifestyle change. Lifestyle changes simply give them the opportunity to walk away from church with few questions asked. The primary reason young adults seem to be going AWOL is because of a deep distrust in the Bible. They had questions about the Bible that were not sufficiently answered.
When Do Young People Begin to Drop Out?

Beemer discovered not only why young people were leaving the church but also when their doubts began to surface. When asked at what age they began to question the Bible, 11% of respondents said college, 44% high school, and 40% middle school (172). When Beemer asked them if this questioning was the beginning of their doubt in the Bible, 56% said yes, 31% said no, and 13% were not sure (176).

These facts are startling, for many people assume that we lose our young people in college. Yet Beemer’s survey shows that 88% of dropouts have at least begun to turn away from the church by the time they enter college. Beemer found a delayed reaction going on in the hearts and minds of these churched young people. First came the doubts, and then came the departure. Many students did not begin doubting their faith in college; they just departed when they went to college.

There are some who question the high dropout rate among our young people, but as one who has spent years teaching in Christian college and high school, I can confirm these statistics. I have even heard many 9th graders affirm their doubts about the Bible’s veracity. Effective discipleship must address these doubts in the hearts of our young people before they go to college, not afterward. Otherwise, it is often too late.

Closing the Back Door

How can we begin to stop the flow of youth who are dropping out of the church? We must show our adolescents that the Bible is credible. We must answer their questions before they go to college, while there is still time. To accomplish this, we must do two things:

1. Teach apologetics and a Christian worldview. Apologetics does not mean an apology or an excuse for what you believe. Rather, apologetics is the presenting of Christian evidence and logical reasons why a person ought to believe in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). As Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks say, “Unbelievers have good questions. Christianity has good answers” (Geisler and Brooks 1990, 14).

We must answer such questions as Is there a God? Is the Bible the Word of God? Is Jesus really the Son of God? We must prepare our children for these questions and for objections to the Christian faith. These questions must be answered for them, or our adolescents will one day walk away.

Realize that our entire culture (including secular schools) is aggressively teaching the apologetics of evolution and secular humanism. Cultural institutions indoctrinate our students in a humanistic worldview and model that worldview. At the same time, our churches, Sunday schools, and even Christian schools are teaching Bible stories that seem to be nothing more than fairy tales to these young people. They are not connecting the Bible to the real world—and we wonder why we are losing them.

2. Teach apologetics in a way that adolescents can comprehend. We are blessed in our time to have some great material in the field of Christian apologetics, yet some of these works are written at a level well beyond the reading and comprehension ability of the average adolescent. For example, what happens when a teenager asks, “How do we know there is a God?” The standard apologetics book offers cosmological, teleological, and anthropological arguments for God’s existence. I have heard adults say, “Randy, I can’t even spell those words, much less understand them!” These apologetics materials, while well written, are far beyond an adolescent’s scope.

I tested the readability level of some apologetics writings and found that their Flesch-Kincaid scores show them to be written at the college level. National literacy surveys have shown that 43% of U.S. adults read only at or below the basic proficiency level—they would not be able to infer the meaning of a metaphor in a poem or summarize the experience required for a specific job advertised in a newspaper. Only 13% read at a proficient level and could compare viewpoints in two editorials with contrasting interpretations, for example (Kutner et al. 2007, 13). Many students read “below grade level.” Experts today recommend writing most information at a 7th- to 8th-grade level.
We must write apologetics material at a level that adolescents can comprehend. At the same time, this apologetics material must not be watered down but must retain its biblical integrity. Material appropriate for adolescents will provide ammunition in this battle for their hearts and minds. To this end, I have developed an adolescent-level apologetics curriculum, which I am using with my students now.

I’m Back!

The day after Thanksgiving break, I was in my classroom setting up for class. Kathy, the Wiccan convert, came up and said, “Hi, Dr. Douglass. I’m back!”

I asked her what she meant. She replied, “On Thanksgiving, I had a long talk with my parents. On Friday, I had a good talk with my pastor. On Sunday, I went forward and rededicated my life to the Lord.”

“That’s great!” I exclaimed. “What happened?”

With tears running down her cheeks, she said, “You often say that unbelievers have good questions, but we have good answers? I had good questions but I didn’t know the answers. Now I know the answers, and they’re my answers. I’m back!”

Many parents are passionate about getting their children into college. These parents must become just as passionate about recognizing and answering their children’s spiritual questions before they send them off to college. Remember, we have good answers. We must know them and share them with our children.

References


Randy Douglass, DMin, is an adjunct professor of religion at Charleston Southern University and a Bible teacher at Palmetto Christian Academy in South Carolina. He is close to completing his doctor of education degree at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has coauthored two books with Norman Geisler: Bringing Your Faith to Work (Baker, 2005) and Integrity at Work (Baker, 2007).

“Now I know the answers, and they’re my answers. I’m back!”