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CHOSEN IN CHRIST
CALLED TO INFLUENCE

Abandoning the Faith

Loving someone
who's turned away
from Jesus



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Introduction

Never, Ever Give Up

By Kelli B. Trujillo



Though her husband's not a believer, a mother finds joy in passing on her Christian faith to her son who asks to be baptized and is enthusiastic about his faith.

But somewhere along the journey from boy to man, he loses his faith. His mother watches and prays as her son gives in to a life of lust, preferring sexual exploits over the "rules" of Christianity.

As time passes, his mother continues to desperately pray as she watches her son become attracted to an alternative spirituality and then join a cult-like religious group. Eventually, her son rejects this belief-system and



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becomes a skeptic, eschewing religion for philosophy. She continues to wait and pray.

Then somehow, despite this young man's determined resistance, God breaks through. At the age of 32, Augustine returns—wholeheartedly—to the faith of his childhood. His mother Monica's years of agonized prayer and heartache have come to a surprisingly joyful end.

Augustine of Hippo, also called St. Augustine, went on to become one of the greatest and most influential Christian leaders of all time. His spiritual and scriptural insights, recorded in works like **The Confessions** and **The City of God** continue to challenge and inspire believers today.

But Monica didn't know things would turn out this way. If we step back in time, into her shoes, we can only imagine what it was like for her to watch her adolescent son starkly abandon his faith and continue to reject it throughout his first decade of adulthood. She'd done her best to raise him in the faith, yet he still chose to turn his back on Jesus. There was little she could do . . . except pray. And, as Augustine records in *The Confessions*, pray she did. He credited her persistent prayers for God's powerful work in his life to protect him during his years away and to draw him back to the truth.

Like Monica, you may be living in the pain of watching a loved one walk away from Christianity: perhaps a child or your husband or a dear friend. Try as you might to convince them otherwise, ultimately the choice is theirs—and they've chosen to leave.

So what do you do? How do you deal with the emotions of hurt and betrayal? The fear for their spiritual well-being? The concern you



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feel for their lifestyle choices? How can you respond—and trust God—through the painful process of loving someone who's turned away from Jesus?

In this KYRIA download, we'll explore this complex and painful issue. These articles look at the disturbing trend of young people leaving the church and explore how Christian communities can better handle the doubts and questions of others. You'll hear personal insights from others whose spouses or children have chosen to leave Christianity. And you'll read about how one woman made the choice to stick it out even when she felt tempted to leave her Christian community. You can use the Reflect questions to guide you in Scripture exploration as you digest the articles and consider how they can speak to your life.

Monica eventually experienced a "happy ending." We know this is not always the case, and she certainly didn't know how things would turn out with her son. Yet her example of years and years of persistent prayer, even when her son seemed only to be going *farther* away from God, can be a compelling example to us. As you consider how you can best respond to your loved one who has left Christianity, may you (like Monica) "always pray and never give up" (Luke 18:1).

Grace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, KYRIA downloads
Christianity Today

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Leader's Guide



How to use “Abandoning the Faith” for a group study

“**A**bandoning the Faith” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer**



The Leavers: Young Doubtters Exit the Church

More than in previous generations, 20- and 30somethings are abandoning the faith. Why?

By Drew Dyck

Some striking mile markers appear on the road through young adulthood: leaving for college, getting the first job and apartment, starting a career, getting married—and, for many people today, walking away from the Christian faith.

A few years ago, shortly after college, I was in my studio apartment with a friend and fellow pastor's kid. After some small talk over dinner, he announced, "I'm not a Christian anymore. I don't know what happened. I just left it."



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An image flashed into my mind from the last time I had seen him. It was at a Promise Keepers rally. I remembered watching him worship, eyes pinched shut with one slender arm skyward.

How did his family react to his decision? I asked. His eyes turned to the ground. "Growing up I had an uncle who wasn't a Christian, and we prayed for him all the time," he said wistfully. "I'm sure they pray for me like that."

About that time, I began encountering many other "leavers": a basketball buddy, a soft-spoken young woman from my church's worship team, a friend from youth group. In addition to the more vocal ex-Christians were a slew of others who had simply drifted away. Now that I'm in my early 30s, the stories of apostasy have slowed, but only slightly. Recently I learned that a former colleague in Christian publishing started a blog to share his "post-faith musings."

These anecdotes may be part of a larger trend. Among young adults in the U.S., sociologists are seeing a major shift taking place away from Christianity. A faithful response requires that we examine the exodus and ask ourselves some honest questions about why.

Sons of "None"

Recent studies have brought the trend to light. Among the findings released in 2009 from the **American Religious Identification Survey** (ARIS), one stood out. The percentage of Americans claiming "no religion" almost doubled in about two decades, climbing from 8.1 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008. The trend wasn't confined to one region. Those marking "no religion," called the "Nones," made up the only group to have grown in every state, from the secular Northeast to the conservative Bible Belt. The Nones were most numerous among the young: a whopping



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22 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds claimed no religion, up from 11 percent in 1990. The study also found that 73 percent of Nones came from religious homes; 66 percent were described by the study as "de-converts."

Other survey results have been grimmer. At the May 2009 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, top political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell presented research from their book *American Grace*, released last month. They reported that "young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate (30 to 40 percent have no religion today, versus 5 to 10 percent a generation ago)."

There has been a corresponding drop in church involvement. According to Rainer Research, approximately 70 percent of American youth drop out of church between the ages of 18 and 22. The Barna Group estimates that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be "disengaged" by the time they are 29. Barna Group president David Kinnaman described the reality in stark terms: "Imagine a group photo of all the students who come to your church (or live within your community of believers) in a typical year. Take a big fat marker and cross out three out of every four faces. That's the probable toll of spiritual disengagement as students navigate through their faith during the next two decades."

In his book **unChristian**, Kinnaman relayed his findings from thousands of interviews with young adults. Among his many conclusions was this: "The vast majority of outsiders [to the Christian faith] in this country, particularly among young generations, are actually dechurched individuals." He reports that 65 percent of all American young people report having made a commitment to Jesus Christ at some point. In other words, most unbelieving outsiders are old friends, yesterday's worshipers, children who once prayed to Jesus.



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To tweak Kinnaman's language, the problem today isn't those who are *unchristian*, but that so many are *ex-Christian*. Strictly speaking, they are not an "unreached people group." They are our brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, and friends. They have dwelt among us.

Won't they just come back?

A handful of researchers insist that the dramatic drop-off in 20something spirituality is not cause for alarm. They view the exodus from the church as a hiatus, a matter of many post-collegiate Americans "slapping the snooze" on Sunday mornings.

In his recent book **Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told**, sociologist Bradley Wright says the trend of young people leaving the faith in record numbers is "one of the myths" of contemporary Christianity. Wright, a shrewd contrarian, says members of every generation are regarded with suspicion by their older counterparts. He describes himself as a youth sporting "longish hair and a disco-print shirt," and asks readers, "Do you think the adults of that generation had any faith in the future based on teens like us?" Though he acknowledges that "we can't know for sure what will happen," Wright believes the best bet is that history will repeat itself: ". . . young people commonly leave organized religion as they separate from their families, but then rejoin when they start families of their own."

Rodney Stark also calls for calm. The Baylor University sociologist concedes that data from his school's research mirror that of the above studies, but Stark isn't shaken. "Young people have always

SPIRITUAL TRENDS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Not all the news about young adult spirituality is necessarily bad news. Discover some surprising and hopeful conclusions in this [LEADERSHIP JOURNAL](#) article, "**Five Myths About Emerging Adult Faith.**"



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been less likely to attend [church] than are older people," he writes. Stark is confident that the youngsters will return. "A bit later in life when they have married, and especially after children arrive, they become more regular [church] attendees. This happens in every generation."

There is something to these arguments. Scholars like Wright and Stark expose the folly of breathless predictions of Christianity's imminent demise. The North American church does not teeter on the brink of extinction. But, in my view, the crisis of people leaving the faith has taken on new gravity.

First, young adults today are dropping religion at a greater rate than young adults of yesteryear—"five to six times the historic rate," say Putnam and Campbell.

Second, the life-phase argument may no longer pertain. Young adulthood is not what it used to be. For one, it's much longer. Marriage, career, children—the primary sociological forces that drive adults back to religious commitment—are now delayed until the late 20s, even into the 30s. Returning to the fold after a two- or three-year hiatus is one thing. Coming back after more than a decade is considerably more unlikely.

Third, a tectonic shift has occurred in the broader culture. Past generations may have rebelled for a season, but they still inhabited a predominantly Judeo-Christian culture. For those reared in pluralistic, post-Christian America, the cultural gravity that has pulled previous generations back to the faith has weakened or dissipated altogether.

So 20- and 30somethings are leaving—but why? When I ask church people, I receive some variation of this answer: moral compromise. A teenage girl goes off to college and starts to



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party. A young man moves in with his girlfriend. Soon the conflict between belief and behavior becomes unbearable. Tired of dealing with a guilty conscience and unwilling to abandon their sinful lifestyles, they drop their Christian commitment. They may cite intellectual skepticism or disappointments with the church, but these are smokescreens designed to hide the reason. "They change their creed to match their deeds," as my parents would say.

I think there's some truth to this—more than most young leavers would care to admit. The Christian life is hard to sustain in the face of so many temptations. Over the past year, I've conducted in-depth interviews with scores of ex-Christians. Only two were honest enough to cite moral compromise as the primary reason for their departures. Many experienced intellectual crises that seemed to conveniently coincide with the adoption of a lifestyle that fell outside the bounds of Christian morality.

The rest of the story

However, in many cases, moral compromise wasn't the whole story. For example, one friend has had distinctly postmodern misgivings. When his father learned of his decision to leave the faith, he rushed his son a copy of **Mere Christianity**, hoping the book would bring him back. But C. S. Lewis's logical style left him cold. "All that rationality comes from the Western philosophical tradition," he told me. "I don't think that's the only way to find truth."

I also met leavers who felt Christianity failed to measure up intellectually. Shane, a 27-year-old father of three, was swept away by the tide of New Atheist literature. He described growing up a "sheltered Lutheran" who was "into Jesus" and active in youth group. Now he spoke slowly and deliberately, as if testifying in court. "I'm an atheist and an empiricist. I don't believe religion or psychics or astrology or anything supernatural."



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Others have been hurt by Christians. Katie, a former believer in her early 30s, had been molested by two members of her childhood church. Her mother occasionally still drags her to church. Once, one of her mother's friends approached Katie with an intense look of concern. She grabbed Katie by the shoulders: "Katie, you've become so hard," she said.

Katie's voice faltered as she recalled the encounter. "That affected me," she said. "I don't want to be hard." She paused to regain her poise. "But you have to be hard, or else life will hurt you."

A sizable minority of leavers have adopted alternative spiritualities. A popular choice is Wicca. Morninghawk Apollo (who renamed himself as is common in Wiccan practice) discussed his rejection of Christianity with candor. "Ultimately why I left is that the Christian God demands that you submit to his will. In Wicca, it's just the other way around. Your will is paramount. We believe in gods and goddesses, but the deities we choose to serve are based on our wills." That Morninghawk had a Christian past was hardly unique among his friends. "It is rare to meet a new Wiccan who wasn't raised in the church," he told me.

In my interviews, I was struck by the diversity of the stories—one can hardly lump them together and chalk up all departures to "youthful rebellion." Yet there were commonalities. Many de-conversions were precipitated by what happened inside rather than outside the church. Even those who adopted materialist worldviews or vogueish spiritualities traced their departures back to what happened in church.

What pushed them out? Again, the reasons for departing in each case were unique, but I realized that most leavers had been exposed to a superficial form of Christianity that effectively



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inoculated them against authentic faith. When sociologist Christian Smith and his fellow researchers examined the spiritual lives of American teenagers, they found most teens practicing a religion best called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," which casts God as a distant Creator who blesses people who are "good, nice, and fair." Its central goal is to help believers "be happy and feel good about oneself."

Where did teenagers learn this faith? Unfortunately, it's one taught, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, at every age level in many churches. It's in the air that many churchgoers breathe, from seeker-friendly worship services to low-commitment small groups. When this naive and coldly utilitarian view of God crashes on the hard rocks of reality, we shouldn't be surprised to see people of any age walk away.

The Christian response

The reasons that 20- and 30somethings are leaving are complex. A significant part of leaving has to do with the new culture we live in, and there is only so much to be done about that. But we in the church have control over at least one part of the equation: how we respond.

While we feel rightly perplexed, if not devastated, when loved ones leave, we should not let grief carry us away. I talked with one parent who was despondent over his grown son's loss of faith. He said his son was "into satanic stuff." After a little probing, I found that the son was really a garden variety pluralist. He loved Jesus but saw him as one figure in a pantheon of spiritual luminaries. This is a far cry from his father's assessment. I cringed inwardly when I imagined them discussing matters of faith.

Christians often have one of two opposite and equally harmful reactions when they talk with someone who has left the faith:



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they go on the offensive, delivering a homespun, judgmental sermon, or they freeze in a defensive crouch and fail to engage at all.

Another unsettling pattern emerged during my interviews. Almost to a person, the leavers with whom I spoke recalled that, before leaving the faith, they were regularly shut down when they expressed doubts. Some were ridiculed in front of peers for asking "insolent questions." Others reported receiving trite answers to vexing questions and being scolded for not accepting them. One was slapped across the face, literally.

At the 2008 American Sociological Association meeting, scholars from the University of Connecticut and Oregon State University reported that "the most frequently mentioned role of Christians in de-conversion was in amplifying existing doubt." De-converts reported "sharing their burgeoning doubts with a Christian friend or family member only to receive trite, unhelpful answers."

Churches often lack the appropriate resources. We have programs geared for gender- and age-groups and for those struggling with addictions or exploring the faith. But there's precious little for Christians struggling with the faith. But two recent books suggest this may be changing: **Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts**, by Thom and Sam Rainer, and **Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them**, by Ed Stetzer. Both of these equip churches to reach disaffected people.

The answer, of course, lies in more than offering another program. Nor should we overestimate the efficacy of slicker services or edgy outreach. Only with prayer and thoughtful engagement will at least some of the current exodus be stemmed.



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One place to begin is by rethinking how we minister to those from youth to old age. There's nothing wrong with pizza and video games, nor with seeker-sensitive services, nor with low-commitment small groups that introduce people to the Christian faith. But these cannot replace serious programs of discipleship and catechism. The temptation to wander from the faith is not a new one. The apostle Paul exhorted the church at Ephesus to strive to mature every believer, so that "we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Ephesians 4:14, ESV).

Ultimately we will have to undertake the slow but fruitful work of building relationships with those who have left the faith. This means viewing their skepticism for what it often is: the tortured language of spiritual longing. And once we've listened long and hard to their stories, and built bridges of trust, we will be ready to light the way back home.

*Drew Dyck is the managing editor of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL at Christianity Today, and author of **Generation Ex-Christian** (Moody). This article was first published in the November 2010 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.*

Reflect

- *As you reflect on your own life and faith journey, can you relate to some of the reasons people feel tempted to leave the church? Explain.*
- *Think of a variety of people who have left Christianity for various reasons. What are the main reasons or motivations in their decision to leave?*



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- *Drew cites several broad cultural observations about why large scores of young people are leaving the church, but then he gets a bit more personal, citing reasons such as moral compromise; attraction to postmodernism, New Atheism, or alternative forms of spirituality; being hurt by Christians or the church; exposure to a superficial form of Christianity; and a lack of safety and freedom in the church to grapple with doubts and questions. Which of these reasons most stands out to you? Why? What makes this reason so powerful or persuasive?*
- *How we respond to those who leave—especially if they're someone we dearly love—can often be complicated by our emotions, desires, and fears. Drew, for example, describes a father who appears to grossly misunderstand his son's reasons for abandoning Christianity. How do your own emotions affect the way you relate to a loved one who has left the church? What does it take to be able to truly empathize and understand another's reasons for leaving?*
- *Imagine yourself into the shoes of a "leaver." From that perspective, what would be the worst things a Christian could do to try to get you to "come back"?*
- *There were "leavers" in the early church, too. In some cases, they left because they chose to embrace other beliefs. In others, such as the situation described in Hebrews, very intense persecution of Christians led some to abandon the faith in favor of a more comfortable life. Read about some of these situations in **Hebrews 6:1–12; 10:23–25; and I Timothy 1:18–20**. Why do you think these biblical writers spoke so harshly about those who left the faith in these specific situations? How might historical and cultural differences factor in? In what ways do these passages speak to the situations of those you know who've left Christianity?*



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- *Drew suggests that we view a leaver's "skepticism for what it often is: the tortured language of spiritual longing. And once we've listened long and hard to their stories, and built bridges of trust, we will be ready to light the way back home." How do you see spiritual longing in the life of a loved one who has left Christianity? (It may be well-hidden—so look beyond the surface.)*



When Doubt Comes to Church

How should we respond to intellectual challenges to Christianity from inside the flock?

By Marlena Graves

In a presidential address at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's annual conference in 1972, evangelical luminary John Stott admitted that he found himself "wondering how the apostle [Paul] would react if he were to visit Western Christendom today. I think he would deplore . . . the contemporary lack of a Christian mind" (from **Your Mind Matters**). Quoting Anglican theologian Harry Blamires, Stott continued: "The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history. It is difficult to do justice in words to the complete loss of intellectual morale in the 20th century church."



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Are things any different nearly 40 years later?

New Humanist magazine recently co-hosted a debate at London's Royal Society for the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce on the question, "Where is the God debate going?" Panelists included novelist Marilynne Robinson, philosopher Roger Scruton, and historian Jonathan Rée. According to *The Guardian's* Mark Vernon, the debate mostly turned into a critique of the New Atheism, with some questioners in the audience proposing reasons for why "people of faith never question their beliefs (unlike scientists)."

Vernon hints that while the New Atheism may be slipping out of fashion, the God debate is not. Indeed, religious questions are still on the public's agenda. But it's not just atheists and agnostics who are lobbing objections at Christianity and theism in general, and bemoan a perceived anti-intellectualism among people of faith. Some *within* the church are grappling with the problem of evil, religious pluralism, and the origins debate, to name a few issues, wondering if their faith is intellectually robust enough to face these topics honestly.

Not too long ago, I received an e-mail from a college student expressing his intellectual struggles with Christianity. He gave me permission to share this excerpt:

I have realized that the arguments I have been fighting all these years—against ethical relativism, against Darwinism, against atheism, against Pentecostalism, against nihilism, against the gay-rights advocates, against amillennialists, against Lutherans and Catholics, against you-name-it—were not fights against those things at all. I had been spoon fed caricatures my whole life. Triumphantly defeating the



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caricatures was easy. But sooner or later, I learned that I would have to encounter real competing arguments instead of watered-down versions. You can't live in your rosy, private-schooled, small . . . church world forever, where every challenge (or perceived challenge, whether innocent or not) to Christianity has a nice, clean, naively compelling answer.

I had been spoon fed caricatures my whole life. The student captured well the triumphalist, anti-intellectual strain present in some quarters of the church. Of course not all objections to the faith are intellectual in nature. But I can't help wondering if some of us are unwittingly contributing to the shipwrecking of faith because we fear directly and honestly addressing seemingly forceful objections. Do we fear that God and his people cannot handle rational scrutiny? That if we honestly and seriously confront the objections leveled against God and the church, both will be found wanting?

I happen to think the answer is no. In college I majored in history and minored in religion and philosophy. I had my own struggles with doubt. Yet I can't count the number of times I was given pat answers, presented with straw man arguments, or told, "See, you shouldn't study philosophy—it only serves to lead you astray." It is this sort of environment that prompted Christian philosopher Clifford Williams to write, "It is difficult to imagine thinking Christians remaining long in such a condition" (see his **The Life of the Mind: A Christian Perspective**).

My philosopher husband and I have become convinced that part of the problem is that we have paid little attention to vices of the intellect: being closed to the ideas of others, an unwillingness to exchange ideas, a poor sense of one's own fallibility, a disposition to yield to the excitement and rashness of the overly enthusiastic



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members of a community, an unwillingness to conceive and examine alternatives to popular ideas, a tendency to wilt in the face of opposition, and impatience with thorough, genuine inquiry.

And we are further convinced that it is both necessary and healthy to question our faith within the church community in order to truly own it. As Tim Keller writes in **The Reason for God**, "A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. . . . A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection. . . ." It's hard to question within community if we are unsure we have the freedom to do so or aren't confident we will receive loving and thoughtful responses.

It's true: We cannot coerce people into loving Jesus and following him. But we can do our part to lovingly remove the intellectual obstacles that those like the *New Humanist* and New Atheists are highlighting by building up our antibodies and rooting out a fear of critical inquiry in our circles.

*Marlena Graves is a writer and blogger. This article was first published online on **Her.meneutics** in October 2010.*

Reflect

- *Marlena's article suggests that the church's general approach to questions and issues raised by other beliefs and worldviews as well as the church's response to questioning within its midst could be detrimental to our faith. Do you think that if the church handled such matters differently, it may make "leaving" less likely? Why or why not?*
- *Imagine you were sitting down with the college student who e-mailed Marlena; how would you respond to his words describing his disappointment with his Christian upbringing and the apologetics he'd been taught?*
- *What do you think of the claim that the e-mailer had been "spoon fed caricatures" rather than given an accurate, three-dimensional understanding of various beliefs and the important questions they pose to Christianity? In what ways, if at all, does your church oversimplify, belittle, or demean other beliefs or worldviews? Or how might you sense a fear of critical inquiry in your church?*
- *What might it look like for your church to allow for meaningful discussion of tough questions? To have room for doubt? How could "healthy" doubt and questioning be distinguished from unhealthy doubt?*
- *Do you think your loved one who has walked away from the faith feels that his or her questions or concerns about Christianity have really been heard? Why or why not?*
- *Rather than primarily seeking to triumph over the other's beliefs, what might it look like for you to personally engage with tough issues in dialogue with your loved one? How might this minister to him or her?*
- *What inspiration can you find from Jesus' demeanor and response toward Thomas when he expressed questions and doubts (see **John 20:19–29**)?*



Tempted to Leave

Why keeping away from my church
community wasn't such a great idea

By Elaine Creasman

A number of years ago I started to withdraw from God's people.

Being involved in church seemed impossible because of family problems. My children had abandoned their faith. My husband's passion for God had cooled, and our marriage was taking such a hit that I wondered if it could survive much longer. My prayers seemed futile.

When I went to church, each time someone asked, "How are your daughters?" or celebrated their children's godly lives, my pain rushed to the surface.



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When someone asked, "Where's Steve?" or bragged about their wonderful marriages, self-pity threatened to smother me. No one else is suffering like me, I decided. *I'll just stay home* seemed like a brilliant idea, but the Lord urged me to stay involved.

Reluctantly, I returned to church, and over time, to a women's Bible study. Slowly, I discovered God desired to use his people—even at their most imperfect—to help me navigate rough waters. Here's what I learned along the way.

Be honest about struggles.

Often I was tempted to keep problems hidden, pretending, "All's right with my world."

Yet as I mustered courage to open up, I noticed my honesty freed others to remove their "my life's perfect" masks and share their heartaches. This caused me to feel connected.

Some people seemed uncomfortable when I bared my soul (maybe they didn't want to "catch" what I had) but most thanked me repeatedly for my transparency.

Allow others to minister to you.

My honesty led to people offering me counsel, hugs, prayers, wisdom from the Word, and at times their tears.

As I humbled myself enough to listen, godly women helped me view my pain and hard times from God's perspective—a testing of my faith and a means to grow. I repented for believing the lie that all my difficulties were God's punishment for my failings as a wife and mother. I allowed women to help me win the battle against fears, doubts, and unbelief.



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Caring believers encouraged me to stay in prayer and the Word and to trust God's timing. I embraced James's words: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (**James 5:16**). I felt my soul being healed and matured—instead of just feeling grieved that my loved ones' weren't. Fellow Christians also helped me see how God was answering prayers for my family life—a little at a time. Gratitude grew.

Once I was ministered to, I was able reach out to others whom I discovered had similar spiritual battles.

Avoid taking hurtful statements personally.

One day in my women's Bible study, I told of my daughters' struggles. The leader of our small group responded, "My daughter wandered from the Lord for a little while, but friends and I just prayed for her, and she's fine now."

"Just" and "a little while" hurt. That day I beat myself up for my lousy prayers and choosing ineffective prayer partners over the years of my prodigal daughters' rebellion. Once again I felt tempted to go home and stay there until all was well.

A hurtful statement a speaker said from the pulpit was, "I must have done things right since my kids turned out so well." That communicated to me: "Elaine, you've done everything wrong."

When I prayed about these statements and many others, the answer the Lord gave each time was, "Forgive them, for they don't know not what they are doing" (**Luke 23:34**).

Unintended hurtful words made me aware of times when I've said things without thinking—when I'm in a good place and refuse to mourn with or even be perceptive of those who are mourning



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(see **Romans 12:15**). Through hurting in a group setting, I've become more compassionate toward and sensitive to noticing those who hurt.

Expect a blessing.

When I'm feeling the worst emotionally and a voice in my head shouts, *Stay home!* that's when I need Christian fellowship. Those are the times I'm most blessed. These days when I resist an urge to stay home, I expect a blessing, and I get one. God also allows me to bless others—especially by speaking truth when they're believing lies I've believed.

The voice telling me to stay home isn't God's, but the enemy's. He wants to keep Christians isolated and hates when we bless and strengthen one another. God rejoices when we do.

Another bonus of staying connected is having fellow Christians to bring progress reports to and people to celebrate with when God answers prayers. For instance, we celebrated that my younger daughter's emotional life has stabilized. She's returned to church and is seeking a closer walk with God. My older daughter isn't as anti-God as she once was, and I can see her heart softening. And my husband's back at church, is dealing with emotional issues, and working hard at being a better husband.

What blessings I and others would have missed if I'd stayed home until the storms of my life passed.

Elaine Creasman is a writer who lives with her husband in Florida. This article was published on Kyria.com in 2011.



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Reflect

- *Elaine's reasons for wanting to walk away were somewhat different than those discussed so far. How would you sum up her reasons in your own words?*
- *No Christian community is perfect—after all, we are all imperfect, sinful people! Do you think Elaine's expectations of her church were unrealistic or set too high? Or do you think she had legitimate reasons for wanting to leave? Explain.*
- *Read and briefly study **1 Corinthians 12:12–27** and **Ephesians 4:1–16**, making note of ideas or principles in each passage that relate to some of the ideas in this article. What connections between the passages and the article stand out to you most? Why?*

Option: Consider how **1 Corinthians 12:12–27** and **Ephesians 4:1–16** might dialogue with the more "harsh" statements in **Hebrews 6:1–12; 10:23–25**; and **1 Timothy 1:18–20**. When read together, how do we get a fuller picture of the ways we are to interact with those who are spiritually struggling or who have rejected Christianity out right?

- *Based on these passages, how do you think God desires us to respond when other believers have spiritual struggles? What might this look like, practically speaking? Can you provide an example?*
- *Elaine's involvement with her church brought her both heartache and joy. Has staying committed to your church community ever been difficult for you? Explain.*
- *How has being a part of an imperfect Christian community brought about growth in your faith or helped you through a difficult time?*



Loving Your Prodigal

What can parents do when a child turns her back on her family and her faith? Author H. Norman Wright offers help.

Interview by Carla Barnhill

Prolific author H. Norman Wright has personally experienced the pain of watching a loved one walk away from the faith. At the age of 20, Wright's daughter, Sheryl, rejected the family's faith and became involved with alcohol, drugs, and abusive relationships. Over the next several years, Wright and his wife, Joyce, prayed, cried, and struggled to bring their daughter back from a dangerous life. Finally, Sheryl turned her life back over to God.

Carla Barnhill spoke with Norm Wright to find out why some children turn from their faith and their families, and what parents can do to help their children avoid the traps of rebellion.



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What do you mean by the term prodigal?

The word is used to describe someone who is extremely wasteful. In the biblical **story of the Prodigal Son**, the son wastes his inheritance and so much more. Prodigal children waste the values their parents have worked to instill in them. They waste their potential, their abilities, their health, their future. In some cases, they waste their lives. For the sake of our discussion, I consider a child who has rejected the values of his family to be a prodigal, even if that child still lives at home, even if that child is 12 years old.

Why do some children become prodigals while other children in the same family don't?

I believe rebellion comes from a combination of personality, environment, genetics, and the basic sinfulness we all have. Parents might say, "We raised all of our children the same way. Why is John in trouble and Jane a model child?" But in reality, every child is different. Every child is born into a different family. The family dynamics change as more children come into the family. Parents react differently to their different children. Maybe you move or change jobs or someone gets sick. All of those changes affect the atmosphere of the family.

There are also factors such as mental illness and addiction that play into this. After our daughter turned her life around, she told us that she has an addictive personality. She believes that contributed to her attraction to a lifestyle filled with drugs and alcohol. If parents suspect mental illness or addiction issues, they should work with a professional counselor as early as possible.

The truth is, every child has free will. If you want to know why some children rebel and others don't, that's the best reason I can come up with.



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Is there anything parents can do that will keep a child from becoming a prodigal?

The best thing parents can do is listen to their children from an early age and get to know this person that God created. What's unique about him? What matters to him? How does he see the world? The more you know about your child, the better equipped you'll be to notice the little changes that might be early signs of rebellion.

And clearly, faith has an impact. Strong families make Christ the center of the home in a healthy, positive, realistic way. The family devotions, praying for one another, praying for the child, demonstrating through your own choices what it means to live for God, these all make faith real for children and help them see that God is someone they can turn to, not someone to fear or turn against.

But again, parents can do all these things and still have a prodigal child. It simply happens.

So if a child does rebel, despite the parent's best efforts, it must be devastating. How can parents deal with the emotions that come with a prodigal child?

I counsel parents to start by allowing themselves to grieve the loss they're experiencing. This is a major upset. Your family is not turning out the way you hoped it would and that brings on a whole myriad of emotions—guilt, anger, blame, confusion, doubt. Those emotions have to be dealt with in order for the family to stay healthy and deal with the crisis in an effective way.

I encourage parents to find a support group through their church or a community organization. When parents withdraw into themselves, the only people they're talking to about this is each other, and they aren't experts. They're people in pain. They need comfort. They need encouragement. They need guidance.



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After a while, I think parents simply have to relinquish their child and give him or her to God. This should be the first thing we do, but many parents will exhaust their own resources before recognizing that God will be the one to bring change. You almost have to detach yourself from the child and realize that you can't control him or bring him back. What you can do is what we ended up doing. We prayed that, since Sheryl wouldn't listen to us, God would connect her with people she *would* listen to. And that's what ended up happening. God used a friend of Sheryl's to get her to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where she finally saw that she had a problem. We never could have gotten her to go to AA, but her friend did.

Parents of prodigals often feel a sense of shame that prevents them from seeking the help of friends or their church. How can parents move past this sense of shame?

Parents have to be willing to be honest, to say, "This is where we're walking, folks. This is what we're going through." If your family is struggling, don't hide it. Don't get hung up by feelings of shame. Just realize that you have a problem you can't fix; there's no shame in that.

How can those of us who haven't dealt with this ourselves reach out to families who might be too embarrassed to talk about their prodigal child?

Frankly, there are a lot of rigid and judgmental people in the church. There's this false presumption that Christians should raise perfect children. But look at God. He is the perfect parent. He gave Adam and Eve everything, did everything right, but they still rebelled.

So we need to be sensitive. If we know others are struggling, we can go to them and say, "If you'd like to talk, I'm available."



Talking to Teens About God

Deliver Us from Evil

What the parents of prodigals *don't* need is someone judging us or telling us what we did wrong or what happened when Aunt Mary's brother went through this. We don't need someone to quote Scripture and then walk away. We need friends who will listen, be there, and support us.

What can parents do to bring their prodigal back home, literally or figuratively?

With our daughter, we maintained a relationship with her throughout her struggle. Keeping a connection is an essential part of loving your prodigal child. As difficult as it can be, parents need to stay in contact with that child. Don't cut them off. Show your love for them. That doesn't mean you accept what they're doing. In fact, we were always clear with Sheryl that we didn't like her lifestyle. Your child might say, "What I'm doing is me. If you don't accept that, you don't accept me." If that happens, it's important to say, "You are not your behavior or your lifestyle. You have value apart from what you do. And we love you as a person. We value you as a person."

Some parents use the subtle-hint approach. They'll put a book in the child's backpack or leave a note on her bed reminding the child that she is loved. They'll say, "Let me tell you how I'm praying for you." It doesn't have to be anything long or complex, just an expression of care and love.

In the end, of course, it's God who will change a child's heart. Parents can only be faithful and know that God is in control.

When the prodigal child does begin to show signs of coming back, how can a family move toward reconciliation?

Patience is essential. It might take a good year of reconnecting before the family feels like they're through the crisis. None of you are the same people you were before.



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There's also a big difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. You can forgive, but the other person doesn't have to do anything about it. Reconciliation means both people reach out. There are often lingering resentments between a parent and the child or between the child and a sibling, which can prevent reconciliation. You just have to deal with those feelings and keep going to counseling or working with a support group or do what it takes to bring the family together again.

Something else I recommend is that parents list their expectations for the returning prodigal. The child should do the same. Both sides need to be honest about what they need and the ways they're willing to negotiate and compromise. And keep your expectations realistic. Your child might be ready to stop drinking or stealing but still be unwilling to go to church or participate in your faith. If you can live with that, then be willing to compromise for the sake of keeping a connection and making a first step toward reconciliation.

So this really is a process?

Absolutely. We want things fixed quickly, but this takes time. And in the end, the biblical model remains the same. The door is always open; the father is always waiting and watching for the son to return. In researching a book on prodigals, we asked the question, "Has your prodigal returned home?" My favorite response was from the parents who said, "No, my prodigal has not returned home. But we're still fattening the calf."

Carla Barnhill is an author who lives in Minnesota. H. Norman Wright is an author of dozens of books. A full version of this article was first published in CHRISTIAN PARENING TODAY in 2000.



Stay Connected

If you don't see eye to eye about faith, here are some tips to help you break through communication barriers that may be separating you from your child:

- **Pray** before seeing or speaking with your child. Pray not only about your child's spiritual state, but also about your own character and demeanor. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you exhibit godly fruit in your interactions, such as kindness, patience, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Lean into God for strength; invite God to give you a Christ-like attitude of true humility (Philippians 3:2-8).
- **Treat your child with dignity.** Always aim to speak to and react to your son or daughter as a person worthy of respect. In your body language, voice, eye contact, and attitude, communicate that you honor your child's ability to make choices. Your child is a person made in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and, for that reason above all others, deserves to be treated with dignity.
- **Listen and empathize.** Usually the last thing a spiritually confused or spiritually hurting teenager or adult needs is a persuasive, apologetics "argument" for the faith from their parents. Instead, let your *life* be the persuasive argument as the Spirit does his work. In the meantime, aim to *listen* during conversations about spiritual topics. Like an investigative reporter, try to really get to the heart of your child's beliefs, questions, concerns, or ideas. The more empathetically and respectfully you truly listen, and the more your child feels you honestly want to understand, the more connected you'll be.

Your child—just like you—has been given a free will. Your son or daughter is not a puppet and, though that allows for painful choices, it is ultimately part of God's good plan for him or her. Your child has their *own story* with God. Don't give up on your child. And take heart, God isn't giving up either.

Kelli B. Trujillo is an author, editor, and mother of three. Join her in conversation about faith and family life at www.kellitrujillo.com.

Reflect

- Read Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15:11–32**. How would you summarize the main point of Jesus' story in your own words?
- In what ways does this parable mirror your own situation with a loved one who has left the faith? How do you relate to the father in this story? What emotions do you think he went through, and how do they mirror your own experience?
- H. Norman Wright emphasizes how important it is for parents or loved ones of a prodigal to allow "themselves to grieve the loss they're experiencing." He goes on to name the tempest of emotions that accompany these situations: "guilt, anger, blame, confusion, doubt." In what ways is your experience like a loss that needs to be grieved? How have you experienced the emotions Wright names? Are there others you'd add to his list?
- "[E]very child has free will," asserts Wright. Ultimately, parents cannot hold themselves responsible for their child's spiritual choices. "[L]ook at God," says Wright, "He is the perfect parent. He gave Adam and Eve everything, did everything right, but they still rebelled." Think for a moment about God's perfect loving parenting and our own human rebellion. What's your reaction to this idea? Does it help you let go of the burden of shame or guilt?
- Re-read the story of the Prodigal Son, but this time in the context of the entire chapter; read **Luke 15**. How do these parables provide you with confidence and assurance of God's love and care for your "prodigal" loved one? How can you more fully trust in God's love and power in your loved one's life?



When Daddy No Longer Believes

Strategies for parenting when your spouse has abandoned his faith

By Nancy Sebastian Meyer

“Half my heart believes in Jesus, but the other half isn't sure he's real.” Seven-year-old Becky hugged me. “What am I gonna do, Mom?”

Her honest words grieved my already aching heart. After four years as a youth pastor, my husband had traded ministry for business. He allowed me to worship God freely, but he eventually stopped going to church and started calling himself an agnostic. I knew Becky would notice our spiritual differences someday, but I still felt unprepared for her question.



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God, however, wasn't surprised. As we sat on the bed and opened her Bible, **Jeremiah 29:13** provided his answer: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (NIV).

"How do we seek him, Mom?"

I read the previous verse, "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you."

An idea I'd heard several months earlier came to mind. "Let's make construction paper flowers and write a prayer request on each one. We'll pray every day for the requests. When God answers one, we'll stick the flower on the wall until we have a whole garden of answered prayers. We'll be able to see God in how he answers us."

By the end of that first week, God answered five of Becky's simple requests, including healing her teacher's illness and allowing a friend to visit for a sleepover. At Becky's suggestion, we stuck the flowers to her bedroom ceiling where she could read them day and night. By the end of the month, 20 flowers graced her ceiling garden. One of them read, "Please help me to know you, God."

Becky is 15 years old as I write this story. Her dad, an awesome father by the world's standards, still considers himself agnostic. Becky, on the other hand, steadily grows in her walk with God. So how can we raise kids to love God when Dad doesn't? I hope the following suggestions offer encouragement.

1. Remember, although you may be required to answer questions about God single-handedly, you're not alone.

When children ask, "Where is God when I hurt?" or "Why doesn't God make Daddy believe in him?" answers may not always seem



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as obvious as God's leading in Becky's ceiling garden. However, God promises in **James 1:5**, "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you." Connect with God immediately through prayer and listen to his gentle promptings in your heart and from his Word.

2. Respond honestly, briefly, and positively to questions about Daddy.

Even worse than fielding questions about God is answering questions such as, "Why doesn't Dad go to church?" or "Why was Daddy so mean tonight?" Since you can't honestly answer for him, you might suggest: "Why don't you pray about asking Dad that question."

When an immediate reply is necessary, I pray for guidance and then keep my response honest, brief, and respectful. For example, if Becky asks me about a questionable CD Dad just purchased, I express concern about the issue, while remaining nonjudgmental toward her father.

3. Speak the truth in love.

When Becky first learned the health risks of smoking, she immediately related her new knowledge to the next smoker we encountered! A stranger might excuse tactlessness from a child, but Dad can get pretty ticked off when reprimanded by his daughter.

Jesus spoke honestly *with compassion*. **John 1:14** describes him as "full of grace and truth" (NIV). A wise pastor once said, "Jesus was not so gracious he was not truthful, nor so truthful he was not gracious." Encourage your children to think, *What would Jesus say and how would he say it?*



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4. Provide a spiritual heritage beyond your home.

As Becky's closest Christian role model, I tried to be perfect—and ended up defeated, discouraged, and exhausted! When Becky needs more than I can give, where can I turn?

Within our local church, one of Becky's friends enjoys *spiritual* adoption. Lili's "Gram" and "Grand" live authentic Christian lives in front of this preteen, continually reinforcing the fact that Christianity is more than just "Mom's religion."

Ask God to provide friends who will be encouraging and pray regularly for your children (and you). If these special people attend your local church, they may be the added incentive your child needs to get to church on Sunday morning!

5. Attend church regularly.

Often I must remind myself to "not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing" (**Hebrews 10:25, NIV**). Becky and I need teaching from God's Word and fellowship, but going to church alone is tough.

One mother commented, "My husband doesn't want to go, and it's just too much work to get the kids up and out without his help." I encouraged her to find an accountability partner—someone to pray for her daily and hold her to her promise to get to church regularly. What do you do if your husband resents being left behind when you go to church each week? Because Jesus taught us to prioritize people over programs, occasionally we enjoy a "family Sunday" away from church. Becky and I sometimes accompany Dad on a Jeep trail ride or go to the city aquarium together. Additional weekly "God-times," like Pioneer Clubs and daily devotions, help keep our faith growing even when we can't get to church on a Sunday.



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6. Learn to recharge your spiritual batteries.

While I don't experience the physical exhaustion of single parenting, my spiritual battles still leave me emotionally wrung out. I find my key to tapping into God's energy in **Matthew 11:28–30**: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you . . . For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." When my husband fails to be a spiritual team player, I picture myself yoked with God—who lends me his power and hope. I spend time alone with God every day and find this commitment produces a powerful, positive, refreshed mother.

7. Get involved in regular Christian service with your kids.

Are your kids accomplishing God's work? Consider **Philippians 2:12–13**, which tells us to show the results of our salvation. This means we need to flesh out, day by day, a relationship with God that serves others. Becky and I sing at retirement homes and run errands for our neighbors. These and other activities put our faith into action, giving us joy, purpose, and unity as a family—especially when Dad joins in!

One of Becky's friends helps out in our church nursery one Sunday evening each month. Becky told me she'd like to volunteer too, but she's not keen on babysitting young children. As a result of her search for a ministry, Becky began writing a kids' page for our church newsletter. Recognizing a child's skills and interests can provide ideas about where God desires to use him or her.

Perhaps right now you're thinking, *Whew!* These seven strategies sound solid, but can I apply them all? Take a deep breath and ask God to show you one or two things he wants you to focus on at this moment. Maybe he's asking you to cut out paper flowers and



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watch your children's faith grow. Or perhaps he's nudging you to find that accountability partner who can encourage you when life seems impossible.

If you've read this article on behalf of a friend, ask God to reveal ways you can help: Pray with her weekly, offer to take her children and her to church with your family, or even watch her kids so she can spend quality time with her husband. Above all, keep praying for her family.

Regardless of which strategy helps you or a friend become a successful spiritually single mom, remember, we're never alone. As God promises us, "I am with you always" (**Matthew 28:20**).

Nancy Sebastian Meyer is an author who lives in Pennsylvania with her family. This article, originally titled "When Daddy Doesn't Believe," was first published in the March/April 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *Nancy has found comfort in **James 1:5**, particularly in her situation as a spiritually-single parent. Read **James 1:5**; how does this passage encourage you in the difficulties you face as a result of a loved one leaving the faith? Be specific: what "wisdom" do you need from God right now?*
- *Which of Nancy's seven suggestions most directly speak to your own situation? How will you put that principle into action?*



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- Reflect on **Ephesians 4:15**. What does it mean for you to speak the truth in love to your loved one? How can your demeanor and tone adequately communicate love, empathy, and respect?
- When she feels alone, Nancy draws upon **Matthew 11:28-30**. She writes, "I picture myself yoked with God—who lends me his power and hope." How does this passage give you comfort? How will you live a life yoked to Jesus? How can he share the "burden" you feel for your loved one?

Praying for Those Who've Walked Away



Patricia Raybon, author of *I Told the Mountain to Move*, reveals what she learned the hard way about the power of prayer.

By Lisa Ann Cockrel

*At age 50, Patricia Raybon was at the end of her rope. A wife, mother to two adult daughters, journalism professor at the University of Colorado, and author, Patricia found herself fumbling spiritually. "In **Matthew 17**, Jesus says we can tell our mountain to move with even the smallest amount of faith. But my prayers weren't moving my mountain. And I didn't have just one mountain; I had a whole range," she says.*

Her eldest daughter had announced she was pregnant out of wedlock. Her youngest daughter had donned a headscarf and converted to Islam. Patricia's mother, in her 80s, needed her care. Meanwhile, her marriage of 25 years was fraught with tension. And her prayers weren't changing any of it.

"I'd grown up in the church and had a relationship with Christ, but for the first time, I asked God to change me instead of my circumstances. I asked him to teach me how to pray," remembers Patricia. "That's when things got interesting."



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*She immersed herself in classic books on prayer—**My Utmost for His Highest** by Oswald Chambers, **With Christ in the School of Prayer** by Andrew Murray, **Celebration of Discipline** by Richard Foster, among others. "But what they all said was, Stop trying so hard to fix everything yourself. That in prayer, it's okay to take it slow and easy. Let God work. He knows our battles. But he wants us to pursue him more than we pursue his answers."*

*In her fiercely candid memoir, **I Told the Mountain to Move** (Tyndale), Patricia set out to tell the story of this prayer journey. Patricia spoke with Lisa Ann Cockrel about her journey of love for her daughters and the ways prayer can move mountains in our lives.*

You attended church all your life, yet you've said you never learned how to pray. What do you mean?

Even though I was a believer, I'd become a carnal Christian. For years I prayed with wrong motives—*Grant me that job promotion!* Or, *Help us buy that house!* But the Lord says he rewards those who seek *him*. The prayer experts say we pray not to get, but to know God. So real prayer is less talking, more listening to God; less asking, more dwelling with God, enjoying his amazing presence. **Matthew 6:33** says it beautifully: "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." Somehow I'd never learned to first seek.

God-seeking prayer isn't an act; it's a lifestyle. It's about living for God's glory. Loving others and seeing what God is up to in the world. And when we do that, it changes our prayers. It's not *me, me, me*. It's about God.

So, from your experience, what's the point of persistent prayer if God doesn't seem to answer?

Because, along the way, *we* change.

Recently, my best friend was praying for an old college buddy who was terminally ill. She even flew clear across country to pray over



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her beloved friend. A few weeks later, the college buddy died in a hospice and my friend was devastated—and angry at God. Why did he send her in faith if he wasn't going to answer? But as we talked, she recalled how grateful her friend was that she'd traveled so far to comfort her. My friend learned the healing was in her willingness to go and be a friend.

It's the *process* of prayer that refines us. We go out in faith, and God takes care of the outcome.

But aren't we supposed to ask God for the things we want?

Well, Jesus adds a qualification. He said in **John 15:7**, "if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!" Prayer is being in process before God. It's *keep on* asking. *Keep on* seeking. *Keep on* knocking. And our transformation is what glorifies God.

Are you saying the outcome isn't important?

What's more important is to surrender to God. The other things? He'll add them, but in his way and in his time. This is trusting and paying attention. I've overlooked answers I wasn't expecting.

Did you feel personally responsible for your children straying from the faith?

Like many moms, I confused being in church with being in Christ. For my girls, that meant church every Sunday, youth activities, choir, VBS—the whole nine yards. I introduced them to organized activities under the roof of a church, not to Jesus. When you know him, you don't walk away from him. So, yes, I felt responsible.

What would you do differently?

Love them! I was a strict, inflexible parent. In hindsight, I'd love them like crazy. Then I'd make sure they understood why.



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Finally, I know who love is: His name is Jesus. That's what praying in his name means—to walk in his character. A woman can change her entire household this way.

How do you pray for your daughters now?

Well, first I listen to God. Then I ask him to show me how to pray in this situation. I never prayed like that when they were younger. Mostly I prayed God would keep them safe and bless them in school—that sort of thing. Those are good prayers. But if I could go back and do it over again, I'd go for the power! I'd seek to know and follow Jesus so I could make him known to them.

While your eldest daughter has reaffirmed her Christian faith, your younger daughter is now a devout Muslim. How did you respond to her conversion?

With God's good grace. Her conversion to Islam has challenged, humbled, and even broken me. But God used it to help me admit I didn't know enough about him or my faith. When she left the church, we argued constantly about religion. In truth, I didn't know enough basic Christian theology to even argue for it. So I set out to learn. And the more I studied, the less I debated; the more I trusted, the more I loved. I don't have to arm wrestle my daughter back to Jesus. I love her—and let God handle the rest.

What's your advice for parents dealing with a prodigal child?

I'd say take that problem to the throne of God and leave it there—then stand back! Because the Lord will first change you. That's the spiritual answer.

The practical answer is to ask God to show you how to love her. I heard a preacher call this the "meantime," because an unresolved problem can feel "mean." So in this "meantime," I love my beloved daughter. Frankly, we have a closer relationship now than when



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she was attending church as a teen. She lives in Houston with her husband, and we talk on the phone all the time. We take vacations together. I listen when she talks. I'm not exhausted with sorrow and I don't preach. I'm trusting in God's love for her.

*Lisa Ann Cockrel is a writer and editor. Patricia Raybon is the author of **I Told The Mountain to Move**. A full version of this interview, originally called "Mountain Mover," was published in the September/October 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

Reflect

- Read **Matthew 17:14–21**. What's your reaction to this passage? Does it leave you feeling inspired? Frustrated? Skeptical? Determined? Why?
- What would it look like for you to embody this type of faith in your prayers for your loved one who has left the church? What changes in mindset and attitude would this require in your life?
- Read **Matthew 6:33; 7:7–11**; and **John 15:1–9**. These passages emphasize both a focus on knowing God as well as a focus on asking for specific things in prayer. How do you see these ideas working together? How can we keep from being so focused on requests that we lose sight of the importance of seeking God's presence in prayer?
- What encourages, challenges, or inspires you from Patricia's description of her current relationship with her Muslim daughter? Why?



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Praying for Those Who've Walked Away

- Read **John 16:5–15**. *Ultimately, there is only so much we can do to try to bring someone back to faith. Even if we handle the relationship perfectly, ultimately it is a matter between the person and God—and we must trust the Holy Spirit to work in their lives in ways that we cannot. What is it like to, ultimately, be powerless to change your loved one? How can this assurance of the Holy Spirit's power provide comfort to you?*
- *How can you build and strengthen your relationship with your loved one in this "meantime" as you hope and pray that he or she will return to faith in Christ? How will a renewed commitment to prayer be part of your effort?*

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Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



Articles

Dear Disillusioned Generation—*The "failed experiment" called the church still looks better than the alternatives.*

By Katie Galli, available from ChristianityToday.com

Married, with Prodigals—*Wayward children can push you apart. Norm Wright explains how to keep your marriage strong while helping your kids get back on track.*

By Caryn D. Rivadeneira, available from Kyria.com

The Myth of the Perfect Parent—*Why the best parenting techniques don't produce Christian children*

By Leslie Leyland Fields, available from ChristianityToday.com

Parents and Prodigals—*As my daughter leaves for college, packing up her belongings, she is still a stranger to me.*

By Virginia Stem Owens, available from ChristianityToday.com



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Additional Resources

The Red Bull Gospel—*It takes more than pizza and video games to give young people a faith that endures.*

By Drew Dyck, available from LeadershipJournal.net

Spiritual Lives All Their Own—*What if children have their own experiences of God and a genuine free will to respond?*

Interview with Donald Ratcliff by Katelyn Beaty, available from

ChristianityToday.com

Torn Between Two Lovers—*Lessons on living in an unequally yoked marriage*

By Kathy Cordell, available from Kyria.com

When Your Loved One Doesn't Come to Christ—*What do we do when we think God isn't "playing by the rules"?*

By JoHannah Reardon, available from Kyria.com

Books

Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts by Thom S. and Sam Rainer (B & H Publishing Group, 2008; 272 pages). Why are so many 18- to 22-year-old Christians leaving the church—and what will it take to reverse the trend? In this important follow-up to the bestseller *Simple Church*, the Rainers share surprising insights from their survey of 1,000 "dropouts." Find out why young adults stopped attending—and discover four concrete strategies for bringing them back!

Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Church and How to Bring Them Back by Drew Dick (Moody Publishers, 2010; 176 pages). Young people today are not just sprinting away from the church, but they're leaving the *faith* as



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well! Drawing on recent research and in-depth interviews, Dyck identifies seven categories of "leavers;" offers advice on how to connect with each type; reveals communication land mines to avoid; and equips you to reawaken the prodigal's desire for God.

I Told the Mountain to Move by Patricia Raybon (SaltRiver, 2006; 288 pages). Raised in a strict, church-going family, Raybon was struggling privately in adult life: a discordant marriage, conflicts with two strong-willed daughters, and underneath it all, a shameful personal secret. But could this humbled Christian, far from her childhood faith, pray prayers that led to lasting change? Believing God alone could move these mountains, Raybon set out to learn the real way to pray. The result is an inspiring account of a journey that impacted her world and transformed her heart—a journey full of lessons on prayer that'll resonate if you long for deeper intimacy with an inscrutable, yet loving, God.

Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them by Ed Stetzer (B & H Publishing Group, 2009; 240 pages). *Lost and Found* presents comprehensive research about and in-depth interviews with young men and women ages 25 to 34 who have never really been churched. The findings, such as how open this generation is to spiritual things, will surprise church-based readers and break some long established assumptions and opinions.

The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism by Timothy Keller (Dutton, 2009; 336 pages). How could a loving God send people to hell? Why does he allow suffering? Can one religion be "right" and the others "wrong"? Responding to the questions of open skeptics *and* ardent believers, Keller draws from literature, philosophy, reason, and real-life conversations to explain how faith in a Christian God is a soundly rational belief.



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unChristian by David Kinnaman (Baker Books, 2007; 256 pages). In his epistle, the apostle Peter instructed us to give others good reason for the hope we have in Christ, but to do so with "gentleness and respect." Unfortunately, in the eyes of many non-Christians today, the church has done just the opposite. In *UnChristian*, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, has compiled startling research among the unchurched and learned that Christians are too often known for the issues they stand against, rather than the hope which they stand for. According to the research, believers are seen as too judgmental, too political, and often hypocritical. Uncover the latest research on the unchurched in Kinnaman's book.

Bible Studies

Doubt Can Strengthen Your Faith—a single-session Bible study examining how handling doubt in a healthy way can play a key role in discipleship, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

Fighting for Your Prodigal Child—a 4-session Bible study exploring how parents can powerfully and effectively help their prodigal child, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

The New Apostates—a single-session Bible study examining Drew Dyck's "The Leavers" article, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

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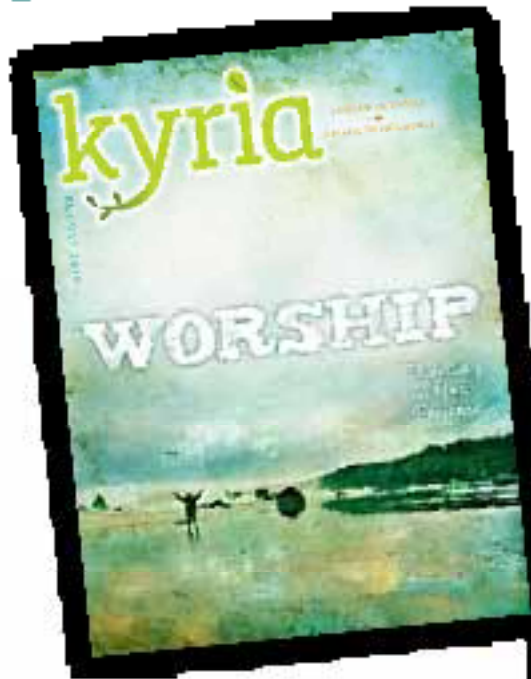
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