

# Why Students Abandon Their Faith: Lessons from William Wilberforce

**Derek Melleby**

College transition is a hot topic in youth ministry circles. More and more parents and churches are recognizing that many students are not prepared for the challenges that college brings. Anecdotal evidence is easy to find. We all know students who have grown up in the church and have made commitments to follow Christ, but have walked away from the faith during college. Some students, of course, return to faith and church later in life, often after marriage or having children, but it's often not with the same vibrancy exhibited during their teen years. Clearly, college has been a difficult place for Christian students. Many students come out the other side no longer identifying themselves as Christian.

Solid statistical data, however, is hard to come by. There have been a few studies completed, and they often affirm the anecdotal evidence, but this is not an easy phenomenon to track empirically. Over a decade ago George Barna conducted a study revealing that "65 percent of high school students stop attending church after they graduate." This statistic helped to ignite the national conversation about college transition. Fill a room with 100 Christian students and 65 of them wouldn't be Christians after high school? That was hard to believe, but with anecdotal evidence so strong, this statistic was rarely questioned at first. Various denominations followed suit and estimated that between 65 percent and 94 percent of their high school students stopped attending church after high school as well. But like any statistical data, there are holes in the research. The Barna statistic, for example, was the result of a survey that included Christians as well as non-Christians. The denominational statistics were more anecdotal than scientific. The truth is we don't have concrete, scientifically verifiable, statistical data to determine the number of students who seem serious about faith in high school but then walk away from it in college. But we do know that it happens and there is a growing concern something should be done about it.

I am convinced that a new approach is needed when confronting the issue of college transition. Rather than questioning the statistics, or giving too much weight to individual stories and experiences, we need to be reminded of this remark from the writer of Ecclesiastes: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). This verse helps us keep things in perspective. In all times and in all places, at some point young people have to take ownership of their faith. This is not new. We can debate the statistics, trying to convince ourselves that it is not as bad as some say it is; or tell personal stories to make it seem even worse; or we can recognize that the challenge for students to make the faith their own is a perennial one. The challenge will always be with us.

I was reminded of this recently when I read *Real Christianity* by William Wilberforce, the member of the British Parliament who worked to abolish slavery. Written in 1797, Wilberforce makes keen observations about why young people often walk away from the faith. We can learn much from his insights regarding the human condition:

"Think about what happens to many young people who are raised with all the benefits of prosperous parents who are cultural Christians themselves. As children, they are taken to church, where they hear the parts of the Christian message that their particular church embraces. Although it is rare in our times, maybe they even receive some measure of religious instruction at home.

Eventually, they leave home, and launch out into the world. Some go to work; some go to college. They face temptations that they have not faced before and give in to them. Their lives might get out of control with the use of alcohol, and they might give in to sexual indulgence. At the least, they never read the Bible or make any attempt to develop a spiritual life. Most don't even attempt to take what knowledge is at their disposal and form their own beliefs and convictions. They don't learn to think.

"Maybe they travel to a foreign country. Things are even worse there. They begin to embrace the ideas to which they are exposed. By the time they return home, they are further away from faith than before. Along with their previous frivolous way of life, they now begin to be consumed with the demands of making a living in the workplace and the desire for a career and success. Most of what they hear about Christianity is in a negative context. If they go to church at all, they hear things that either make no sense to them or that they find offensive to the way they live. They have no grasp of the Bible to compare with what they hear.

"The result is an attitude toward Christianity that is not only negative but also one that is rooted in a faulty sense of intellectual superiority. The young also have a way of seeing right through the charade of those who profess the faith but don't live the life. What began as a vague, almost imperceptible doubt soon grows. By slow and steady degrees, the doubt becomes most fixed in their minds. In a twisted kind of way, the young men and women begin to hope their doubt is well founded. Any reason that reinforces it is welcomed. Doubt becomes greater, not based on evidence, but merely by dwelling in the mind. This is certainly not always how it goes, but in general you could think of this scenario as the genesis of unbelief. This is not always the process, but generally speaking, it is the natural history of skepticism. If you have carefully observed someone you know drifting into unbelief, you have probably seen something like this occur."

Wilberforce perceptively describes the process by which young people walk away from the faith. His hypothetical scenario may not be true for everyone who leaves the faith, but there are four timeless truths concerning those who walk away from the faith that can be drawn from his words. Being attentive to these areas can help us as we prepare students for the challenges ahead.

**First, students who walk away from the faith succumb to temptations they haven't faced before.** Many students may have been exposed to the temptations of alcohol and sex in high school, but in college, being away from home and parents, makes the challenges more difficult to withstand. As one student recently said to me, "I didn't know it was possible to go to college and *not* drink!" Parents and youth workers must work diligently to remind students of the dangers of alcohol abuse and promiscuous sex, while also casting a better vision for what college *can* and *should* be. It *is* possible to find a caring community on campus that fosters a healthy social life, but it requires intentionality. Help students to make the needed college connections before they head off to college.

**Second, students who walk away from the faith didn't learn to *think*.** The problem that Wilberforce diagnosed over 200 years ago is still with us today. Many students lack critical thinking skills, failing to take what knowledge is at their disposal to form their own beliefs and convictions. We must continually create space for students to wrestle with the big questions of life. College should not be the first time that students engage in abstract or deep thinking, but for many students it is. Critical thinking and Christian discernment are

spiritual disciplines that need to be developed. Like anything worthwhile in life, the developmental process takes time and is difficult. A youth group devoted to these activities may not draw the biggest crowds, but if we are serious about preparing students for life after high school, helping student to “learn to think” will be a mark of our ministries.

**Third, students who walk away from the faith are consumed with the demands of making a living and the desire for success.** It is so easy to get caught up in the world’s definition of success, and it’s often difficult to understand how faith relates to day-to-day choices and career decisions. In contemporary American culture, the chief end of man is often expressed as: “He who dies with the most toys wins!” The student who mentioned that he didn’t realize that it was possible to go to college and *not* drink could easily add: “I didn’t realize it was possible to go to college and *not* follow the American Dream!” The temptation to live a life based on material possessions and upward mobility is pervasive, and many students find it too difficult to live a counter-cultural life based on following Christ. The attitude becomes: “You can’t follow Jesus in the ‘real world.’” Once again, community is essential to withstand the challenge. College students need to be surrounded by other people who live life differently than the world around them. Teenagers need to be continually exposed to examples of what it looks like to be *in* the world but not *of* it. For Christians, calling is more important than career.

**Fourth, students who walk away from the faith see right through the charade of those who profess the faith but don’t live the life.** It was true in Wilberforce’s day, it is true in our day and it will be true until Jesus returns: the problem for most people who walk away from the faith is not Christ, but Christians. Students who are contemplating leaving the faith are longing not to be around perfect people, but to be around people who are perfectly honest about their own shortcomings and desire to change. Honesty must always trump superficiality.

Wilberforce’s words remind us that the problem of students leaving the faith after high school is not *new*, and the reasons for why students drift away are unlikely to change. Learning from the past can help us in the present to ensure that our ministries are addressing the central challenges students face. If Wilberforce’s timeless diagnosis is correct, youth ministries that focus on community, discernment, calling and honesty will better prepare students for life after high school.

*Derek Melleby is the Director of the College Transition Initiative, author of Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning (Baker Books, 2011) and co-author of The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness: A Guide for Students (Brazos Press, 2007).*



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