

Good-bye, God

By Drew Dyck

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A note from Derek Melleby, Director of the College Transition Initiative:

According to author Drew Dyck, young people aren't walking away from the church—they're sprinting. A recent study by Ranier Research revealed that 70 percent of youth leave church by the time they are 22 years old. Barna Group estimates that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be "disengaged" by the time they are 29 years old. Unlike earlier generations of church dropouts, Dyck believes that these "leavers" are unlikely to seek out alternative forms of Christian community such as home churches and small groups. "When they leave church, many leave the faith as well." Drawing on recent research and in-depth interviews with young leavers, Dyck's newly published book, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith and How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Publishers, 2010), shines a light on the crisis and proposes effective responses that go beyond slick services or edgy outreach events. The book seeks to equip and inspire parents, church leaders, and everyday Christians to reawaken the prodigal's desire for God and set him or her back on the road to a dynamic faith. What follows is adapted from the first chapter of *Generation Ex-Christian*:

My friend Abe was raised as a Christian, but abandoned his faith during college.

"I don't know what happened," he shrugged. "I just left it."

When I heard about Abe's "deconversion" my mind jumped to the last time I'd seen him. It was at a Promise Keepers rally the year after we graduated from high school. I remember being surprised to see him there; neither of us had been strong Christians in school. But watching him standing next to his father in the coliseum, it was clear something had clicked. As the voices of 20,000 men lifted in unison, Abe pinched his eyes shut and extended one slender arm skyward. He seemed solemn yet peaceful, totally absorbed in God's presence.

It was a powerful evening. I can still hear the words of one of the event's speakers. He wasn't the most eloquent in the lineup, and he had a slight speech impediment, but his passion for Christ was palpable.

"I don't know about you guys," he said. "But I want to run the race so hard that when I reach the end, I fall exhausted into the arms of Jesus."

After he spoke, the stadium was silent. In that moment I think we all felt the same way. We didn't want to just hobble through our spiritual journeys. We wanted to sprint. When we came to the end we wanted to collapse, into the arms of Jesus.

I'd considered myself a Christian ever since my dad walked into my room one night in 1983, kneeled beside my lower bunk, and led me in the sinner's prayer. I was five years old when that happened, and probably didn't understand exactly what I was saying. And yet, it was real. It wasn't until my late teens, however, when I carefully read the gospels, that the faith truly became my own.

When I saw Abe worshipping at the rally, I assumed he had undergone a similar transformation. We were both pastors' kids. We had both gone through the proverbial rebellious phase, but that didn't mean we didn't believe.

That's why I was shocked by his decision to leave the faith. I was a little curious too. What had prompted Abe, who was my age, and from a remarkably similar background, to defect? How could the guy I'd watched lost in worship turn cold toward God?



Fast forward six years from that Promise Keepers rally and Abe's sitting in my studio apartment, slapping a cigarette from a pack of American Spirits. The intervening years had taken us each down very different paths. I was married. He was single. I was headed to Seminary. He was wrapping up law school. I was an active Christian. He'd rejected the faith. At the time of his visit, he was celebrating a last stint of student-life freedom by motor biking across the United States. I offered him my futon when he rolled into town. It wasn't much, but compared to the nights he'd been spending in his popup tent, it probably felt like the Marriot.

We talked late into the night. Since high school he'd lived an exciting and eclectic life. I felt a twinge of jealousy as he described experiences that seemed lifted from a Jack Kerouac novel. He had lived in London, and worked as a bartender. He backpacked through India. He spent summers tree planting in northern Alberta, a lucrative seasonal gig that funded his nomadic existence. Somewhere in Asia he suspended his travels to meditate in a Buddhist monastery. He'd become a vegetarian.

"I can't see how people can justify using animals as a resource," he said as he fried up a delicious feast of falafel balls for me and my wife.

His experiences had changed him—most significantly in his views about God. When I broached the subject his voice grew quiet.

"When I left the faith, I thought it would feel really bad. I assumed I'd come right back. But I didn't feel bad. I felt nothing."

Though he was philosophical about his departure, he didn't regret it. In fact he felt liberated. And he was slightly combative.

"Can you honestly say that Christianity has been good for humanity?" he asked.

His tone was equally critical when he talked about his parents, especially his father whom he described derisively as "a right-winger."

If I had been saddened by Abe's decision, his father was devastated. When he heard of Abe's decision he rushed him the book *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, hoping it might bring him back.

It didn't.

Abe read the book, even enjoyed it, but didn't change his decision to bid his faith farewell.

"Growing up I had an uncle that wasn't a Christian and we prayed for him all the time," Abe said wistfully. "They probably pray for me like that now."

Why do young people leave the faith? Whenever I ask people inside the church I receive some variation of the same answer. They leave because of moral compromise, I am told. A teenage girl goes off to college and starts to party. A young man moves in with his girlfriend. Soon the conflict between their beliefs and behavior becomes unbearable. Something has to give. 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 don't be fooled. These are just excuses, smokescreens designed to hide their real reason for going astray. "They change their creed to match their conduct," as my parents would say.

There's even an academic basis for this explanation. Psychologists call this "cognitive dissonance." Basically the theory goes like this. Opposing beliefs or behaviors cause psychological distress. We seek to resolve the tension by dropping or modifying one of those contradictory beliefs or behaviors. Once we do, our psyche's harmony is restored.

I think there's a lot of truth to that hypothesis—more than most young leavers would care to admit. "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting," wrote G.K. Chesterton. "It's been found difficult and left untried." Even practicing Christians can attest to the truth encapsulated in that clever verbal twist. Living the Christian life is hard, and when you're falling short, as we all do, it's easy to forfeit relationship with an invisible deity in order to indulge sinful, real-world desires.



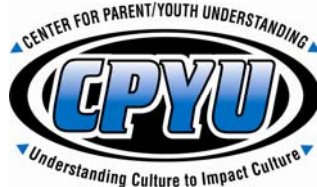
For Abe, I'm sure moral compromise played a role. Christian morality didn't exactly gibe with his new lifestyle, which included relationships with the opposite sex that fell outside the biblical model. It would have been difficult for him to hold a Christian worldview while engaging in a pattern of behavior that opposed it.

Yet the moral compromise explanation didn't tell the whole story. He had other reasons for leaving. And they weren't just smokescreens. The more we talked, the more I believed that they were at the root of why he left. He balked at Christian entanglement with conservative politics. He pointed out what he saw as a lack of compassion for the poor among Christians. And he wasn't moved by the apologetics of yesteryear. Ultimately I saw that his parents' attempts to call him back to God were futile because he inhabited a different universe, one populated with ideas and sensibilities that were completely alien to them. I'd soon begin to discover the laws of this new universe and find out just how many other young adults had followed Abe through the wormhole.

Drew Dyck is the editorial manager of the ministry team at Christianity Today International. He holds an M.A. in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. Before coming to Christianity Today he was the editor of *New Man* magazine. He and his wife, Grace, live in Carol Stream, Illinois and attend Jericho Road Church. Learn more about his book *Generation Ex-Christian* at www.drewdyck.com.

Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith and How to Bring Them Back is available for purchase at [Hearts & Minds Bookstore](#), [Christianbook.com](#), [Amazon](#) and wherever books are sold.

Looking for more resources to help prevent a generation of ex-Christians? Learn more about what CPYU's College Transition Initiative is doing to equip the next generation for service in God's Kingdom at www.cpyu.org/cti.



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