

THE NEW APOSTATES

Young people are leaving the church in record numbers. Here's why, and what to do about it.

Drew Dyck has noticed an alarming trend— young people are leaving our churches in droves. Actually, lots of observers have seen this trend. However, Dyck, author of the book *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . and How to Bring Them Back* (Moody, 2010), has done more than simply write off this generation or wring his hands over them. Instead, he talked with them to find out what went wrong, why they're leaving, and what might bring them back.

Scripture has much to say about people who start the faith journey but don't finish it—and how we can encourage them to return to the road. God's Word tells us how to mature in our faith, how to center on Jesus Christ, how to love God with our minds, and how to gently and mercifully walk with those who doubt.

Scripture: Matthew 22:34–40; Luke 18:18–30; 24:13–35; Ephesians 4:1–16; Jude 20–23

Based on: "The Leavers," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2010



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.



- 1** Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them as well.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "The Leavers" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

"Among young adults in the U.S., sociologists are seeing a major shift taking place *away* from Christianity," Dyck notes. "A faithful response requires that we examine the exodus and ask ourselves some honest questions about why." That's because, unfortunately, Christians are too much part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Why? And what can we do to turn this around?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] When you have doubted your faith, what was the reason—intellectual, moral, or relational?

[Q] How did fellow Christians handle your doubt—compassionately or brusquely?

[Q] If your faith is now strong, what brought you back? If it isn't, what would it take to help you wholeheartedly embrace Christian faith?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: The body of Christ is integral to the walk of faith.

You may have heard the term "Lone Ranger Christians." But how about "Lone Ranger non-Christians"? Alienated, many young people are leaving the church. Dyck's article notes that these new apostates 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). ... According to Rainer Research, approximately 70 percent of American youth drop out of church between ages 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." Many don't come back.

Before we can call them back, we need a clear picture of what a healthy, biblical church community looks like. The apostle Paul provides one in this passage, which focuses on unity in the church. Read Ephesians 4:1–16.

[Q] Paul reminds the Ephesians of all they have in common. What do they share?

- How does unity apply when we are responding to a person's questions of faith and doubt?

[Q] Unity, however, is not uniformity (vv. 7–11). How do Christ's gifts help us encourage one another, particularly in times of doubt?

[Q] What is the goal of these gifts (vv. 12–16)?

- How are we to attain unity and maturity so that we are solidly established in the faith and protected from apostasy?
- Do you see this kind of “body life” at work in your group or church? How could we cultivate it?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To more closely identify what a healthy church community looks like.*

Activity: *Paul urges the Ephesians to walk in a worthy manner according to their calling, and then lists some hallmarks of what this worthy walk will look like. Record answers on a whiteboard or poster board as the group names each of these hallmarks. When finished, ask: How would you characterize this list—as self-centered or other-centered? How might these characteristics apply to the topic at hand?*

Teaching Point Two: Christian faith is more than doctrinal assent; it is following Jesus.

There are many reasons young people leave the faith. One is that they imbibe what some researchers have called not real, vital Christianity but a form of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” When it doesn’t “work,” they head for the church exit.

Moral compromise is another factor. Dyck writes: “A teenage girl goes off to college and starts to 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.”

Yet we have to wonder whether these young people, for all their former professions of faith, ever had a real relationship with Jesus. Did they know him? Did they love him? Were they captured by his beauty and truth? Let’s help people come face to face not with “faith,” but with *Jesus*.

Read Luke 18:18–30.

[Q] A “ruler” (elsewhere called “young”; see Matt. 19:20) comes to ask Jesus how he can inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to obey the commands, and the ruler says he has. Why wasn’t that enough?

[Q] Jesus apparently thinks the young man’s religiosity is still lacking something, so he lays a new burden on the man. He must give everything he has, and follow Jesus. What might his attachment to his wealth tell us about the quality of his faith?

[Q] What blessings does Jesus promise to those who give everything to follow him (vv. 28–30)?

[Q] What keeps us from giving Jesus everything? How might our own hesitations affect those who are younger and watching us?

Teaching Point Three: We must love God with all our minds.

Dyck notes that some who have wandered from the faith have had serious intellectual questions, and that the response of Christians to their doubts has been decidedly *anti-intellectual*: “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.” How different from the call of Jesus to love God, not only with our hearts and souls, but also with our minds!

Read Matthew 22:34–40.

[Q] What commandments test *you* the most?

[Q] Jesus sums up the epitome of the Law in just one word: love. But it is a love that goes beyond passion or feeling or commitment to a cause. It encompasses the *mind*. How do we love God with our minds? Name some ways.

[Q] What does this short passage tell us about dealing with people who have intellectual questions about the faith? How can we love God with our minds in these cases, and how can we help them to do so?

Teaching Point Four: We must walk gently with those who doubt.

Dyck says that our response to doubters matters, and that too many of us seem threatened by them. “Christians often have one of two opposite and equally harmful reactions when

they talk with someone who has left the faith,” Dyck says. “[T]hey go on the offensive, delivering a homespun, judgmental sermon, or they freeze in a defensive crouch and fail to engage at all.” Read Luke 24:13–35, and note the contrasting approach of Jesus.

[Q] Jesus engages these two disappointed believers not with a sermon, but with questions. What does this imply about what confused, hurting people need?

[Q] Then Jesus answers their doubts, having earned the right to do so. Are you prepared to deal with people’s intellectual doubts clearly and gently? How might you become better prepared?

Teaching Point Five: We must do whatever we can to help people stay on the path.

Apostasy is serious. Whatever we believe about free will and God’s sovereignty, we cannot give false hope to those who walk away from the faith. But neither can we downplay the role God has given us in helping to keep friends on the path. Dyck reminds us, “Ultimately we will have to undertake the slow but fruitful work of building relationships with those who have left the faith.” If these are real relationships, sometimes we will say the hard things to these fellow pilgrims. In fact, if we love them, we will do whatever we can.

Read Jude 20–23.

[Q] As God’s beloved, we are to build ourselves up in our holy faith and to pray. How does the fact that we are beloved provide encouragement to prayerfully strengthen our faith? How can we steep ourselves in that love?

[Q] What are we to do with those who doubt (v. 22)? How can we show mercy to them? How might remembrance of our own struggles help? Why is giving mercy to doubters so hard?

[Q] What are we told to do with strugglers in verse 23? What is the attitude we are to exhibit? How do we combine mercy, fear, and hatred of sin?

Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

Young people are leaving the church in record numbers. While some researchers believe this is simply a temporary phenomenon, there are good reasons to fear this trend may be a permanent feature on the landscape of the American church. Certainly whatever the reasons

or duration of the problem, the fact remains that apostasy, the deliberate turning away from faith, is nothing to laugh at. And, in fact, many who are turning in their Christian keys blame Christians at least in part for their decision. So we who claim to follow Christ need to look at our own lives and do all we can to snatch “the leavers” from the fire.

We need to see Christian faith as a community project, as primarily an encounter with Jesus, as an opportunity to love God with our minds (as well as our hearts and souls), and to gently, but faithfully, walk alongside doubters, doing whatever we can to reintroduce them to the great Lover of their souls.

Action Point: *Invite a friend or neighbor who has drifted from Christ to be a part of your group or fellowship. Then pray earnestly that he or she finds Jesus there.*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us (Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a monthly column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.*

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Answer the Skeptics:** Newspaper and magazine articles regularly report the growing influence of evangelicals. The stories are often related to issues in the political arena or the economic buying power of Christians. How do you engage your neighbor or coworker who is not a Christian with the Good News about Jesus Christ? Use this study, that includes a Philip Yancey article, to help answer that question.
- **Doubt Can Strengthen Your Faith:** Mention the word *doubt* in most church groups and red flags begin to fly. Many Christians equate doubt with becoming sidetracked in the faith and, ultimately, with unbelief. But is doubt really so dangerous to a person's spiritual life? How can doubt be used for good?
- **Doubt That Leads to Truth:** When we look to the Bible, there is perhaps no better example of how doubting can strengthen one's faith than Jesus' own disciple, Thomas. For many who read the accounts of Thomas in the Gospels, he is merely a skeptic who was weak in his faith. But as we see in this study, “Doubting Thomas,” as he has been dubbed, may have much to teach us about finding truth on the path of questioning our faith.

Christianity Today Bible Study

THE NEW APOSTATES

Leader's Guide

- **Dealing With Our Doubts:** Is it wrong for a Christian to doubt? One of America's greatest poets, Emily Dickinson, struggled her entire life to achieve certainty in her beliefs. What can we learn from her poetry about the risks of the Christian faith?

📖 **Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Church . . . and How to Bring Them Back**, by Drew Dyck (Moody Publishers, 2010). The author gets behind the headlines and actually talks with the new apostates to gain valuable insights for the church.

📖 **Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts**, by Thom Rainer and Sam Rainer (B&H Books, 2008). Why do so many young adults (18 to 22) leave the church, and what will it take to bring them back?

📖 **Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them**, by Ed Stetser, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes (B&H Books, 2009). With a focus on 20- to 29-year-olds who don't currently attend church, the authors outline nine best practices for a church to reach such young men and women successfully.

📖 **All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us**, by Stan Guthrie (Baker Books, 2010). This book focuses on the way Jesus asked questions to draw people into clear thinking about life and faith—and, ultimately, into a living relationship with him.

📖 **Hipster Christianity** (Baker Books, 2010), a book by Brett McCracken, critically analyzes church attempts to recapture the interest of young people. A Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Hipster-Christianity/112719812101235>) carries on the conversation.



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."

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 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)."



{ CULTURAL TRENDS }

The Leavers

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



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 age 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.

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.

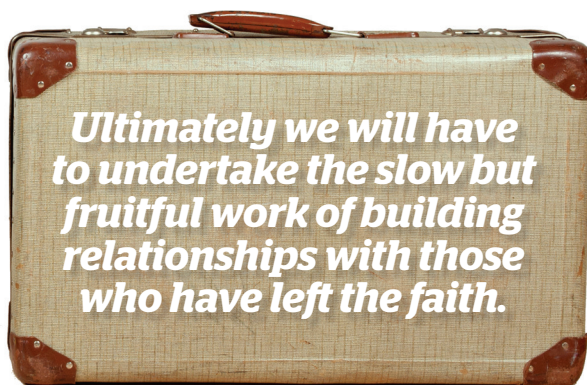
WON'T THEY JUST COME BACK?

A handful of researchers insists that the dramatic drop-off in 20-something 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 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 30-somethings 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 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.”

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 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 naïve 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 30-somethings 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: 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.

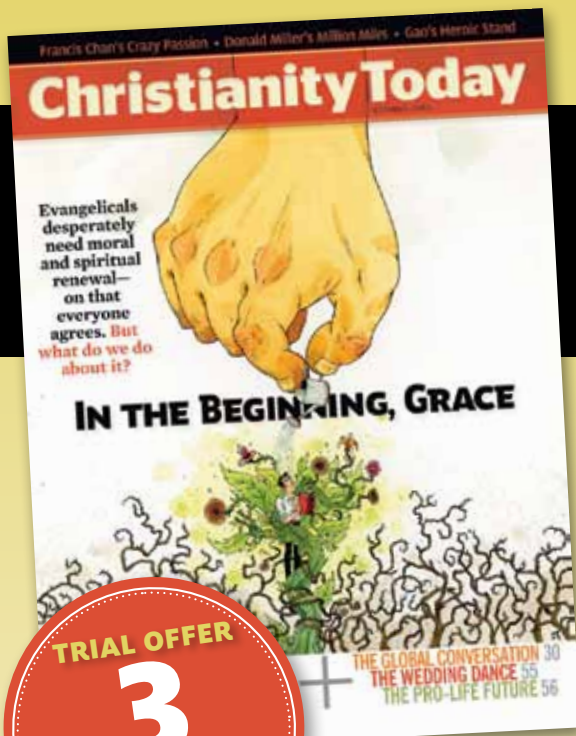
One place to begin is by rethinking how we minister to those from youth to old age. There's nothing wrong with pizza and video

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" (Eph. 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 a manager in the Church Ministry Media Group at Christianity Today International, and author of *Generation Ex-Christian* (Moody).

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