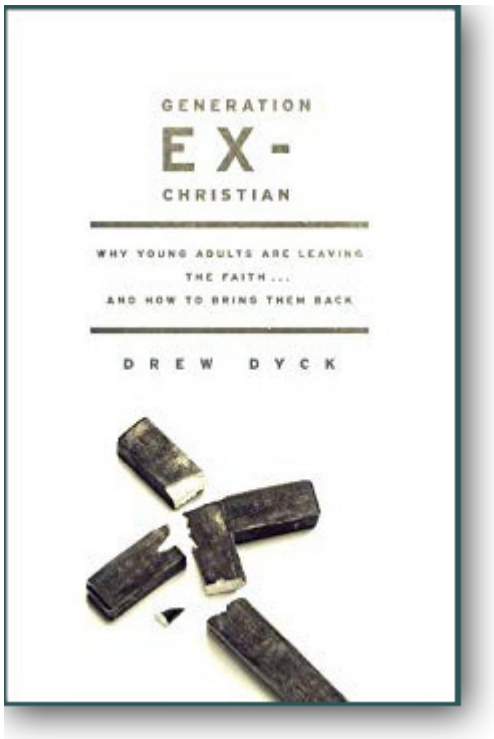
Ex-Christians: Ways to Bring Back the Leavers

Steve Cable provides an overview of why young people leave the church based on Drew Dyck's book Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back.

Over the last several years, Probe has been reporting on a changing young adult society that is marginalizing the church at an increasing rate. When we analyzed relevant survey data and our own survey taken of 18- to 40-year-old, born again Christians, the data revealed that even among Evangelicals, cultural captivity was the norm for the vast majority of Christians. One result of culturally captive Christians is that their children often become "leavers," leaving the faith entirely once they are out on their own.



Are there others who are seeing the same degree of disconnect with the truths of Scripture in the life styles and life choices of young, adult Americans? I want to look at one such prominent voice speaking out about these same concerns. Drew Dyck is the author of *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back*{1} and managing editor of *Leadership Journal*.

Six Types of Leavers

Dyck's book is not primarily driven by general survey data. Instead, it tells a more personal story. He connected with people who had left their Christian upbringing. He talked with them about their life choices *and* he attempted to share Christ in a way that would be meaningful in the context of their personal journeys. As a result of this experience, he felt that those leaving their Christian influenced youth to enter into adulthood without a total faith in Christ could be placed into one of six different categories. He entitled these categories:

- Postmodern leavers – those adopting a postmodern view where no meta-narrative is to be trusted
- Modern leavers – those who believe only what they can prove and Neo-Darwinism seems more provable
- Neo-pagan leavers – those who gravitate to an earth-based religion where they are essentially their own gods
- Rebel leavers – those for whom a sinful lifestyle appears more appealing or who don't want to "give in" to God

- Recoilers – leavers who withdraw because of an emotional hurt associated with people claiming to represent Christianity, and
- Drifters – perhaps the largest group of leavers who gradually drift away because their faith was never that deep to begin with.

Each category of leaver creates a different challenge for one who desires to lead them into a true knowledge of Jesus. Just as Paul used different approaches to share the gospel in the synagogue, the marketplace and the philosopher's meeting place in Athens, so we need to tailor our approach to communicate effectively with our audience. In what follows, we will consider each of these categories and some of the ways one can best share with them.

Postmodern and Modern Leavers

Postmodern thinking is becoming the cultural norm for young adults. The postmodern view holds that there is no objective truth applying to all, but rather each person or group of people defines their own truth. As J. P. Moreland puts it, "In a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective truth, reality, value, reason and so forth."{2} Yet, many young adults still adopt modernity, the dominant view throughout the twentieth century. Those with a modern view believe linear thinking and rational thought can lead us to objective truths valid for all. In his book *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck finds both of these viewpoints create stumbling blocks for belief.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is true for all people in every age. This view runs counter to the "true for you but not for me" mentality of the postmodern generation. Many young adults influenced by postmodern thought have a difficult time accepting the all-encompassing, meta-narrative of the gospel. These leavers believe that Christianity is too narrow and

judgmental to be a part of their own truth sphere.

Dyck points out that those with a postmodern perspective are not really interested in hearing your apologetic arguments. Even if you weave a compelling logical argument, they will nod, smile, and ignore you. They need to see the impact of the truth of Jesus lived out in your life before them. Invite them to participate with you in serving others, creating an opportunity to share your story. They are, initially, more interested in your personal story. How has Jesus Christ made a difference in your life?

Conversely, those with a modern perspective are not as interested in your personal story. With moderns, ask questions to understand how they decide if something is true. Model a concern for the truth before laying “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” on their plate. Focus on the truth of the gospel, not letting ourselves get sidetracked into other arenas. How satisfying is their alternative view, and what are the consequences if they are wrong in their perception of truth?

Many modernists report that most Christians hastened their departure from the church through trite, unhelpful answers to the questions they were asking. Be willing to do the research to answer their questions thoughtfully and with confidence. Remember, there are good cogent explanations to their questions and their objections.

As Dyck discovered, effectively sharing with a leaver today requires us to know whether their general thought process is more shaped by modernism or postmodernism. Their answer determines whether we start with our personal experience or with the total truth of the gospel.

Neo-Pagans and Rebels

Two more groups of leavers Dyck labels Neo-pagans and Rebels.

Dyck discovered a surprisingly large number of Neo-pagan leavers. Neo-pagans have gravitated to the beliefs that they are ultimately gods living in a society where the earth is to be nourished and women are as important, if not more so, than men. One common example of this religious view is Wicca.{3} Another example is Oprah's mishmash of Eastern mysticism.{4}

As with other leavers, begin by asking them questions to understand what they believe and what attracted them to it. With Neo-pagans, Dyck suggests starting by sharing with them our appreciation for nature and our sense of responsibility to care for it as God commanded. We also can share the honor that Christ and the church gave to women. They need to understand that women are "fellow heirs," not maidservants in Christ's kingdom. Upon earning a listening ear, we can share how we have experienced God's presence in our midst. Share our spiritual experiences with them. Above all, recognize that you are engaging in a spiritual battle that must include fervent pray on their behalf.

As he examined his relationships with different types of leavers, Dyck realized that some of them leave not to follow after a different belief system but, instead, to rebel against their view of a creator who is attempting to limit their self expression. Some rebels are motivated by a desire to do their own thing and participate fully in the short-lived pleasures of this world. Others are motivated by a desire to spit in the face of God, declaring their independence.

To effectively reach out to spiritual rebels, we need to let them know we care about them as persons. The world is already showing them that in their rebellion they are not really free. Everybody serves something. Get them to talk about what they are serving, whether it is money, success, clothes, power, etc. Then share with them how you experience true freedom as a captive of the source of all true freedom, Jesus Christ. As Paul tells us in Galatians, "For you were called to freedom, only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the

flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13).

Drifters and Recoilers

Drifters and Recoilers are two more kinds of leavers.

Dyck identifies the Drifters as the largest group of leavers, exhibiting "that entrenched human defect—the tendency to drift from God."{5} They did not set out to walk away from the faith of their parents. Over time it became less important to them, until it played no real role in their lives. As Dyck put it, "the biggest danger to Christianity is Christians."{6}

Recent surveys showed 18- to 29-year-olds who indicated they had no religion growing from 11 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2008.{7} Of these young adults, two-thirds of them were leavers from an earlier point in their life where they considered themselves Christians. Their most common reason for leaving was not some intellectual epiphany, but rather they "just gradually drifted away from the religion."{8}

Drifters are not driven by specific intellectual objections. They may have no real objections or arguments against Christian beliefs. Instead, they are apathetic toward it. It just is not important in their life.

To reach Drifters, one must redefine their perception that a Christian life is not worth pursuing. They need to see us loving Jesus because of who He is and not because of what He can do for us. It is not about getting God to do something for us. It is about the opportunity for eternal fellowship with the One who created us all.

The Drifters need to be connected with older adults who are living with an eternal perspective. Who are "redeeming the time because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). We need to raise the bar on the Christian life. It is more than the sterile, play-acting game they may have seen from their parents. You

cannot call them back to a watered down Christianity that was unable to hold their allegiance in the first place. Instead, we need to live out before them the radical lifestyle of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

The final group of leavers are the ones Dyck calls the Recoilers. These people are a special case. Their lives have been marred by significant pain. They relate the source of this pain to their Christian experience. For the Recoilers, it is typically only in the context of a relationship that healing can take place. On the one hand, we need to empathize with them, while, on the other, they need to see the joy our faith brings to our lives. Gradually, we may be able to help them delineate between God who loves them and the people who hurt them.

Reaching This Generation

In *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck identified six different types of faith leavers: Postmoderns, Moderns, Neo-pagans, Spiritual Rebels, Drifters, and Recoilers. Recognizing that we are called to be "all things to all men so that we may by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22), we can tailor our approach to more effectively reach each type of leaver.

Let's consider five aspects that need to be consistent regardless of which type of leaver you are dealing with.

Listen to them to understand which type they may be. If we jump into sharing without knowing, we run the risk they will tune us out permanently.

Articulate why we believe what we believe. We need to have a good basic understanding of why we believe the gospel is true. If we have a good grasp of the basics, we can tailor our approach to the type of leaver we are addressing.

Enter into relationship with the long view in mind. Don't

expect to reverse their dismissal of Christianity overnight. Over time we want clear away some of the obstacles standing between them and a vibrant faith. Be prepared for this effort to take time.

Focus on forging loving relationships. All the intelligent words in the world won't matter if they view us as hired guns adding another notch to our tally. Paul reminded Timothy, "The aim of our instruction is love proceeding from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Demonstrating Christian love makes them more willing to sincerely listen to us.

Consistently pray for the leavers in our lives. As Dyck put it, "We can give our loved ones who have strayed no greater gift than time spent in the presence of God on their behalf. Plead, ramble, cry, rage—but don't stop." Pray that "God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ . . . that we may make it clear in the way we ought to speak" (Col. 4:2). If we are not bringing God into the relationship through prayer, we are not speaking with His effectiveness.

I don't believe the God who "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) would at the same time desire a large portion of our young adults to leave behind faith in Jesus Christ. We are not to throw up our hands in surrender, but rather to dedicate ourselves to sharing Christ in ways that communicate the truth to different sets of ears. Let's commit together to reach out and bring these leavers into an eternal relationship with Christ.

Notes

1. Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Publishers, 2010), Kindle edition.
2. Ibid., Chapter 2.

3. See Michael Gleghorn, “Wicca: A Biblical Critique,” Probe Ministries, 2002, probe.org/wicca-a-biblical-critique/.
4. See Steve Cable, “Oprah’s Spirituality: Exploring A New Earth,” Probe Ministries, 2008, probe.org/oprahs-spirituality-exploring-a-new-earth/.
5. Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, chapter 16.
6. Ibid.
7. Kosmin & Keysar, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population, A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf, “Highlights.”
8. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S., 2009, www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux-Changes-in-Religious-Affiliation-in-the-US.aspx

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