Why Kids Leave the Church After High School

The Youth Transition Network has released the results of research about why 70% of students in high school youth groups have left the church within a year after high school graduation.

One big reason is the unrealistic expectations that our young people sense from parents and church authority figures. When asked, “What does it mean to be a good Christian,” students responded with a long list of do’s and don’ts, always and nevers:

- No sex
- No secular music
- No fun
- No profanity
- No bad attitudes
- Be perfect
- Be a virgin
- Be wholly devoted to God
- Be righteous
- Be a role model
- Don’t doubt
- Have all the spiritual answers
- Always be positive
- Always be in a good mood
- Wear proper clothing
- Go to church all the time
- Always read your Bible
- Always be praying
- Know the whole Bible
- Get along with everyone
- Always be happy
- Never talk back

- Do not fail
- Do not fail
- Do not fail

Wow. And that's a PARTIAL list! If someone said to you, "This is what it means to be a Christian," would you want to sign up?

What's also heartbreaking is what ISN'T on the list:

Reveling in God's love for me
Appreciating His gifts of grace and mercy
Loving God back because I am so moved by His tender love for me

No wonder so many students live a "goody-two-shoes" Christian life on Sundays and Wednesday nights, and a completely other, separate life the rest of the week! No wonder they don't see the point of staying connected to a church once their parents stop making them go.

So many of our students feel that they can't be successful Christians. They think it's hopeless to live up to the expectations they sense. They think that being a Christian is just too hard.

Sounds like they need to be introduced to what grace looks like. Sounds like they need to have it modeled to them. Sounds like the rest of us need to embrace it ourselves and live it out so they can see it up close and personal, and see why following Jesus is so much more than checking off the boxes on our spiritual report cards!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_kids_leave_the_church_after_high_school on April 28, 2009.

What's Happening to Our Youth? – Christians Should Be Concerned

You've probably heard for some time that the youth from our churches have been having a tough time when they make the transition from high school to adulthood, whether that is to college, the workforce or the military. Josh McDowell addressed this in his latest book, *The Last Christian Generation*, where he documented that research indicates that anywhere from 69 to 94 percent of our youth are leaving the church after high school. And few are returning.

Other organizations suggest the figure is between 55 and 88 percent. Either way, the picture isn't good. Our youth are in trouble and we need a vigorous and coordinated response. Recently I attended a meeting of national youth and college ministry leaders to help forge a response to this growing problem. Hosted by the folks at Youth Transition Network, YTN, (www.youthtransitionnetwork.org) some troubling observations emerged.

Many in our youth culture are living double lives. One life is meant to be invisible at church (they know the right behaviors and speak "Christianese" to pass as good kids). In the other life they follow worldly pursuits in secret, away from parents and church leaders among friends who accept them as they are. This is motivated by what YTN director Jeff Schadt calls a triangle of discouragement (see: www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1)

One leg of the triangle is the burdensome sense of guilt over their moral failures coupled with a sense of isolation. They

don’t feel free to talk with anyone about their guilt. Basically they feel like a spiritual failure.

The second leg of the triangle involves what they feel is a disconnect between a gospel of grace and expectations of perfection from parents and church leaders. They’re not smart enough, spiritual enough, attractive enough, etc. They just don’t feel like they measure up.

The third leg brings all this together in an overall sense of not feeling trusted, believed in or accepted, warts and all. Thats a pretty nasty triumvirate.

Add to this the fact that 93% of graduating high school seniors can’t name even one college ministry. Therefore, they mistrust what they don’t know and fail to get connected. Most college freshman also feel unprepared for the level of freedom college affords and are frequently overwhelmed by the level and difficulty of work the university expects.

As Josh McDowell also points out, the majority of our graduating youth don’t believe Jesus is the one true Son of God, don’t believe Jesus rose from the dead, don’t believe in Satan and don’t believe the Holy Spirit is real.

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not new, but that they didn’t realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said “No!” This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long Mind Games Conference will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

Check out these additional resources for more information and help in making this critical transition easier and more fruitful:

• www.youthtransitionnetwork.org: Official site for Youth Transition Network.

• www.liveabove.com offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.

• college101seminars.com offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.

• Conversations CDthis information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.

• www.boundless.org/college contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.

• TrueU.org is a general site for students of faith.

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MySpace: Parents and Kids

Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking

MySpace and other social networking sites can be a great boon or a great danger. Byron Barlowe cautions Christian parents of teens to exercise discernment in educating themselves about this important part of life, and look for a redemptive view of this social technology.

Very Big and Very Hip

MySpace.com: *It's big, it's growing, it's controversial for good reasons, and it's probably touched your family—and you may not even know it. In this section, we answer the questions, "What is it and why do you as a parent need to learn more about protecting your kids without cutting them off?"*

Is *MySpace* a harmless teen hangout or a treacherous trap? Should parents forbid your kids from using *MySpace* or similar social networking Web sites? Kids, do your parents, like, *even* have a *clue*? And could Christians legitimately use *MySpace* as a mission field?

Controversy about *MySpace* still abounds, even in the fast-moving online world.

Imagine this: Your straight-A, straight-laced teenaged daughter Lori met Aaron online when he visited her *MySpace* profile, a Web page about her. Now she wants to go to the concert with Aaron and his online buddy, "PartyCrasher." "But mom, we've been 'friends' for weeks!" she whines. Mom and Dad, what do you do now?

This may not happen to your family, but something similar happened to a Michigan family whose previously trouble-free sixteen-year-old daughter sneaked a flight to the Middle East

to rendezvous with a *MySpace* "friend"![{1}]

So, what is *MySpace*? According to one top ranking site, in August 2007 it became the sixth-most-visited Web site on the Internet,[{2}] with over 100 million accounts.

A "perfect storm": millions of people—many of them in their teens and twenties—are connecting with friends, meeting new ones, producing Web
pages and video and music, chatting, inviting back and forth to events—even
doing business and art—all within virtual communities.

Think of it as a microcosm of the World Wide Web, only much more easily connected and organized, even by kids. If the Internet was the Wild West, social networking sites—sites like *MySpace*—are becoming its boomtowns.

Wired magazine explains, "*MySpace*.Com, the Internet's most popular social networking site…has *helped redefine the way a generation communicates*."[{3}]

One digital culture watcher wrote, "Community-based websites are the fastest growing sites on the Internet. The teen social ecosystem *MySpace*" is the biggest.[{4}]

"According to some," writes Connie Neal, author of *MySpace for Moms & Dads*, "MySpace marks a societal revolution as monumental as the industrial revolution."[{5}]

MySpace owner Rupert Murdoch said, "The average person who is computer proficient is self-empowered in a way they never have [been] before."[{6}]

It's this newfound "empowerment" that rightly concerns parents.

Let's keep perspective. It's only natural that real life is replicated online. A Roper study found that "online communities represent a real and growing phenomenon, but one

that is dwarfed by interest in *real-world* social networks . . . [like] extended family (94% interest), neighborhood or town (80%), religious or spiritual organization (77%), hobby/interest (69%)" and so forth.

The directors of *BlogSafety.com* have written a handy book entitled *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking.* ("Blog" is short for Weblog, an online diary or commentary page.) They write regarding the rapidly evolving topic of teens redefining blogging into more of a social interaction: "As we adults struggle to find the language that describes this phenomenon, teens are speeding ahead, making it up as they go. . . . To them, these sites are just another tool for socializing."{7} Online and offline distinctions blur into oblivion.

What does this mean for Christian youth and parents?

Dangers and Solutions

MySpace *and similar social networking sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. Threats like malicious software, cyberbullying, and sexual predators render it risky for the unprepared and unsupervised.* MySpace *is being called to account and is responding, but it's primarily up to parents to protect their children.*

One thoughtful parent and Christian school educator responded to the topic as I first did: "Isn't *MySpace* a waste of time or worse, a place where kids think they're experiencing real relationships but are *only* getting a risky situation?" His observation was that the kind of kids who were drawn to *MySpace* already had deep needs that weren't being fulfilled, primarily by parents.

As a parent of three pre-teens, I shared his skepticism. Yet, there's a bigger picture, I found. There's hope, too. Nonetheless, it can be scary, especially in light of greater

autonomy for kids who naturally lack discretion.

Let's pretend you find your thirteen-year-old son pacing after something hits the wall with a crash. He blurts out, "They put up a site about me with nasty pictures and said I'm fat! Now everybody is messaging about it. I'm not going to school." He's been cyberslammed and feels his young world crashing in.

The sense of public humiliation caused by cyberbullying is coupled with the danger that online threats can spill into real life. *MySpace* and similar sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. As a parent, you may choose to forbid or restrict use of *MySpace* in your home. But I suggest you choose in an informed, careful way.

Sexual dangers are the best known. Chatrooms and posted messages easily enable such temptations and threats. One recent trip to *MySpace* rendered solicitations to chat online with a sultry woman seeking American servicemen and a gang-type fellow with the screen name "King Pimpin'."

In 2002, fifteen-year-old Katie Canton met John in a live online chat room. Since he lived far away, Katie felt free to send photos and flirt. Soon John was sending Katie gifts and e-mailing.

This story ended well: Katie testified at John's trial where he got twenty years in prison. But it had taken Katie participating in a role-playing video game to realize that her behavior and that of her would-be abuser was becoming a classic case of online predation.{8} This is why parental education and supervision are crucial.

Again, some perspective is in order. It's tempting to view sites like *MySpace*.com as a monolithic online ghetto. A more accurate word picture may be a high school campus. Enter on one side, see the "dopeheads"; enter another, see the "jocks" and cheerleaders. You can't paint with too broad a brush in assessing it accurately. And students can privately stay in

the “nice part of town.”

Concern is warranted, of course. The required minimum age for *MySpace* is fourteen. However, age verification is still technically impossible, largely due to lack of a public track record for minors—ironic, as many of them create public records openly on such sites.

Parents have sued on behalf of their abused daughters, and thirty-four state attorneys general are now demanding more age-verification controls.{9} Meanwhile, *MySpace* has reportedly discovered thousands of members who are convicted sex offenders. “The attorneys general of Georgia, Idaho, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Mississippi and New Hampshire joined Connecticut in signing a letter to the company asking it to turn over information.”{10}

MySpace has responded. The company deleted two hundred thousand “objectionable” accounts.{11} (A similar move by networking site *Friendster* caused a mass exodus, a sad commentary on many of its users.) *MySpace* also began developing parental tracking software, seen by many as just a start.

After hiring a former prosecutor with experience working on sex crimes against children as chief security officer, in January, 2007, *MySpace* donated a breakthrough national database to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). It features the first-ever method to match faces and body features like tattoos to often-elusive sex offenders. Providing “a way to filter convicted offenders from younger *MySpace* members, the database combines the records of individual state registries, plus allows searches based on images, which the NCMEC said is important.”{12}

A new senate bill would require—for the first time ever—sex offenders to register their email addresses. Donna Rice Hughes, president of the watchdog/activist group Enough Is

Enough, says, “While there is no ‘silver bullet’ for protecting children from Internet dangers, this legislation will help to provide another protective barrier for millions of children. . . . Parents must remain proactive and educated about the safety rules and software tools available.”{13}

Child safety experts agree: parental guidance should be the first and strongest line of defense. Technology continues to outrun ethical reflection in a culture marked by the philosophy, “If it can be done, go for it!” Pragmatism, the myth of progress as always good, lack of a biblical understanding of sin’s pervasiveness and seriousness and sheer greed, drive many of the developments like the *MySpace* revolution.

But so do innately human needs and God-given desires to connect in a disjointed, wired world. Moral panic regarding teens and technology are nothing new. Doomsday prophecies—partially deserved—ensued with the advent motion pictures, television, and the Internet itself, as Internet researcher Danah Boyd points out.{14} Wise adaptation is always essential to being “in the world but not of it.”{15}

Hanging Out and Friending

Kids hang out on MySpace *because virtually everyone they know does, even if they would prefer not to. Another big draw: shared interests. But teens need to appreciate the distinction between acquaintances and true friends, as well as appropriate vs. illegitimate public intimacy while being truly “real.”*

What can make young men cry? Take away their online “space.”

At a conference panel discussion on social networking, four ministry leaders shared nearly identical experiences. Their teens had naturally migrated to *MySpace* with their peers and created profiles there, unknown to these conservative Christian dads. After perusing the site, three of the four

outright forbade use of *MySpace*. One by one, they told tales of begging and weeping. One boy sobbed, “Dad, it’s the only time I’ve ever felt cool.”

This is tricky. Parents’ gut reaction may be to minimize or dismiss such a notion. Yet, socialization at this age happens naturally, inevitably, even critically. But online? Here?

But part of the vital process of adolescent socializing is decoding cues about where you fit into the youth culture and *who* you are perceived to be. If kids are deeply grounded in the love of their God and family, it’s just another “place.” It’s when this grounding is missing that *MySpace* can easily become a platform to present a false self.

Danah Boyd talks about the psychology of publicly viewable social networking: it’s performed. “Showing face” becomes key, being “real” has its limits while “friending” online. Note the use of “friend” as a verb there.{16}

Author Connie Neal lists ways *MySpace* meets the needs of teens in uncanny ways, needs to:

- *Communicate with peers*
- *Try on different styles*
- *See what others are like*
- *Explore their generation’s music, art, photography*
- *Hear, view, read stories through media*
- *Flirt*
- *Make friends*
- *Feel included in a group{17}*

For a time, *MySpace* also seemed unavoidable (it may be “like,

so last year" at this point; *Facebook* is reportedly the social site of choice today among youth). Danah Boyd says, "For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life—they are [at *MySpace*] because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it's cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do.
Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Joneses."{18}

Social networking relies on clicking to "make" or invite "friends." In contrast, an ancient Hebrew proverb states, "A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."{19}

This leads to a deeper question: "What does the term 'friend' really mean?" Certainly more than a popularity contest, which many accuse *MySpace* of becoming. Stephanie Bennett, writing for *Breakpoint,* warns, "In many ways these technologies reduce relationship to a commodity—something one possesses rather than a jointly developed friendship."

Bennett continues:

> *Just as the practice of [slow-paced] courtship . . . gave way to dating and the now common practice of objectifying "the other" [or "hooking up" and casual sex], the rules of relationship are . . . being rewritten, and . . . are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.{20}*

Author C. S. Lewis wrote:

> *Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not*

> *share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."{21}*

Perhaps herein lies the greatest appeal of *MySpace*—shared interests. This is not lost on teenagers.

In balance, as one participant in a CNN.com forum wrote, "True friends . . . need to learn when to stop blogging and go across campus to help a friend."{22}

C. S. Lewis also wrote, "Eros will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities."{23} The scantily clad girls parading on certain pages at *MySpace*
reflect our culture. Sex is confused with intimacy nowadays; psychological nudity on the Internet is not so different.

Billed as a place to make friends and connect in community, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Xanga* and the like may be having the opposite effect, according to one study at San Diego State. It uncovered "an attitude of 'It's all about me'" prevailing among college students, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, and "blogging and social networking are 'playing a big role' in this."{24}

Nonsense, says tech educator Andy Carvin. Social networking largely entails "communities where people reinforce interpersonal relationships through sharing and creating content. . . . [They] want to be a part of something bigger than themselves."{25}

Social sites should reflect and enhance relationships, not define them. Challenge the presumption of *instant-friendship-by-mouseclick* with your kids as necessary. Guard against not only physical but "psychological nudity."

This presents one more important conversational topic for

parents training their kids in a biblical worldview marked by serving others, not by parading themselves or sending false signals.

Parents and Teens Cooperating

Picture yourself or your child in a situation like this: "We're sorry, Caitlyn, but we just cannot hire you. Your online history isn't in keeping with our company's standards." A growing host of those among the Internet generation with online regrets have walled off their online socializing from prying parents and ended up miring their futures in controversy.

Another problem with *MySpace* and social sites is what Boyd calls *persistence in digital publics*. Unable to envision the future, kids don't grasp the lasting ramifications of their youthful foolishness, often captured publicly and permanently in cyberspace. "Without impetus," Boyd says, "teens rarely choose to go private on *MySpace* and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they've "friended." They would just prefer [that] adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men."{26}
Natural teenage feelings indeed.

Boyd continues:

> *While the potential predator or future employer doesn't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanding complete control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.{27}*

While hers may sound like a throwback to the 1960s "Question authority!" mantra, Boyd raises a good point. She points out that nowadays adults control youth environments as never before due to fear of abduction and safety issues. "Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang outs like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7-11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents."{28} Balancing the imperative to protect against the need to let go is tough.

At the same time, parents, teachers, and youth leaders need to inculcate and model a biblical respect for God-given authority. When kids disrespect this, their Internet privileges should be at stake. Some practical safety tips for parents:

- *Make sure your kids profile themselves online privately, only to well-chosen friends.*
- *Ask your kids to invite you online as a "friend"—but don't embarrass them!*
- *Openly discuss your concerns about social networking with your child.*
- *Tour their online space and those of their friends.*
- *Be alert to kids who are very secretive about their Internet use.*
- *Use the computer in a common area of the house.*
- *Monitor mobile online use and set up accountability with meaningful consequences. Yet, too many rules could exasperate older kids.{29}*

Remember the story of the crying kids who had *MySpace* privileges revoked? One dad took a different approach. He entered into his daughter's online world and began exploring

how to safely navigate and do ministry outreach together. Connie Neal describes *MySpace for Moms and Dads* how she participates with her daughter's willing friends as spiritual and relational advisor.{30}

The eventual goal of child-rearing is increasing autonomy and decreasing dependency. Social networking allows kids some autonomy, but they need to be careful in such a public arena. We as parents do well to act knowledgeably, not react out of sheer emotion.

Redeeming *MySpace*

MySpace has effectively tapped into youth culture *and* human nature. Teens are riding a culture-wide wave of self-expression.

But adult audiences there—and especially at other networking sites—are even bigger. Companies are now glomming onto the model for business purposes. *AnimalAttraction.com*, a social networking site for people who love pets, started as a dating service. Now, you can create a tailor-made social network through services like *Ning*.

Up to ten thousand Virginia Tech students conversed on social sites the day thirty-two were murdered in a shooting rampage.{31} Presidential candidates are leveraging networking sites today.

Why is this idea so powerful? Could it be that self-expression is a sign of *imago dei*, the image of God imprinted into the soul of everyone? God spoke the world into existence, and we, his highest creatures, create ideas in much the same way. We seem to have an insatiable need to be heard, especially as we emerge into young manhood or womanhood.

What if we're really after much more—eternally satisfying relating that nothing on earth can compare to? For many folks,

online "friends" or a bigger-than-life Web identity are just new ways to reach out for what's unreachable in this life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "If we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy . . . we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world."{32}

MySpace can be surprisingly redemptive. It served as a clearinghouse of mourning for Anna, murdered in cold blood while working at a McDonald's. A youth-led movement to help Ugandan orphans is building to huge proportions.

The head of Internet outreach for one of the world's largest ministries encourages viewing *MySpace* as a mission field. He tells kids, "It's where your friends and *their* friends are already. Jesus called us to be smart, not safe." As Paul wrote to the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."{33}

If you decide that *MySpace* is not for your family, there are Christian alternatives created for fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship; *Meetfish.com* and *MyPraize.com* are two.

Rather than "circle the countercultural wagons," why not explore the frontier of online social networking with your child? In a few years, the choice will be theirs, and they will likely default to socializing online as well as offline. They need to learn how to:

- ***Be discerning online**, asking things like, "Do I know and trust this person? Will this help me or hurt me?"*
- ***Reflect Christ online:** "How am I coming across? Does it honor my family and God? Am I teasing with moral compromise?"*
- *Ask themselves "Who seems lost, alone, afraid? Who needs the gospel?"* ***That is, see their online life as a calling of Christ**.*

Dr. Kathy Koch of *Celebrate Kids* offers a real-life prescription for healthy self-esteem: "Parents and teachers who pay attention to children and teens for who they are and not just what they do, believe in kids' present value and not just their future potential, and encourage kids by celebrating them on more than their birthdays."{34}

Do this while teaching discernment and a thoroughly biblical worldview, and social networking may not be a problem. It could be a blessing in disguise.

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Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion

Christianity: Religion of Hate?

In the last decade, it has become increasingly common to hear the accusation that Christians are hateful. In the United States, this type of comment has become the mantra of homosexual rights groups who are outraged that Christians would claim that homosexuality is a sin. With the murder of homosexual Matthew Shepherd in 1999, Christians were blamed for creating a hostile environment and provoking violence against homosexuals by claiming that homosexuality is immoral. Homosexuals often scoff at Christians who say, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," insinuating that the two cannot be separated. Consequently it has become increasingly difficult to dialogue with these individuals due to their suspicion that Christians, in spite of their expressions of love, actually *hate* homosexuals.

Of course, accusations of hatred against Christians are nothing new. This charge was leveled at the first century church as a preamble to the state sanctioned persecution that occurred off and on throughout the Roman Empire until the fourth century. But today many of those who accuse Christians of hate take their marching orders from their understanding of

Friedrich Nietzsche, who called Christian priests "the truly great haters in world history . . . likewise the most ingenious haters."{1} Nietzsche was absolutely contemptuous of Christians and pulled no punches when it came to his polemic against them. He is infamous for his announcement of the death of God in his writings and was known to be Hitler's favorite philosopher. Consequently, Christians typically distance themselves from Nietzsche due to his hostility to the Christian worldview.

But while Nietzsche's writings are often blasphemous, this does not mean that Christians should ignore his insights. Rather than dismissing his critique, we should ask ourselves if he may have something to say to the church. Perhaps we need to be reminded that Jesus' harshest words were directed toward those who put on an impressive outward show of religiosity, but whose hearts were not right with God. We need only read Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three to see that some of His most severe rebuke is found there, directed towards His own. Unfortunately, one major school of interpretation has determined that the seven churches represent different ages of church history, of which the first five have already transpired. This interpretation tends to distance us from the Lord's rebuke, as if evangelicals are the praised church of Philadelphia, and the lukewarm Loadiceans are the apostate church of the end-times. It is no wonder that we reject the blistering critique of someone like Nietzsche when we comfort ourselves by assuming that the "gentle" Jesus would never speak harshly to us!

Just as Jesus spoke out against those who hid behind the façade of religion, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is based on the assertion that Christianity is not motivated by love, but rather by a hateful envy, driven by the need for power over others. And since Nietzsche is the inspiration for many today who call Christianity hateful, it would seem that listening to Nietzsche's critique is especially important. By

understanding Nietzsche, we can be better equipped to respond to the accusations of hatred against Christians that have become common today. Furthermore, we may find that Nietzsche, rather than being just a cranky despiser of religion, actually has a prophetic message for contemporary Christians.

The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota made headlines by claiming that religion is for weak-minded people who are incapable of getting through life without some sort of crutch. The governor quickly apologized for any offense he may have caused, but his claim that religion is just a crutch for the weak is certainly not new. Karl Marx said essentially the same thing by calling religion the opiate of the masses. However, no one has been more creative than Nietzsche when it comes to a critique of Christianity. His contention is not just that Christians are weak, but that Christianity itself was the vehicle by which the weakest members of society were able to overcome the dominance of those more powerful than them. Thus the very basis of Christianity is said to be hatred for, and envy of, the rich and the powerful.

It is important to recognize that Nietzsche was a trained linguist with a deep interest in the history of words. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche claims that the concept of *good* originally was a synonym for nobility and therefore referenced the noble aristocrats of ancient times. At the same time, those who belonged to the lower strata of society, those who were originally referred to as plain and simple, were designated as *bad*.{2} Nietzsche's point in all this is that when we look at the original sense of the words *good* and *bad* they were descriptive of one's social status, rather than being a moral evaluation.

However, it is Nietzsche's contention that this all changed when priestly religions such as Judaism and Christianity were able to attain power in society. He suggests that not only did

they transform the conceptions of good and bad to include a moral dimension, but that they went even further by creating the concept of evil as well. Out of their hatred and envy for the ruling elite, and their desire for power, the priests transformed the word *good* to refer to the poor and lowly members of society and had the audacity to refer to the rich and the powerful as evil! When we read the beatitudes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we see how Nietzsche indicts Christianity for this reversal. It is not the rich and the powerful who are blessed, but the weak and the poor! Nietzsche believed that Christ's praise of the powerless was an act of subversion, an attempt by the weak to exact revenge against the elites of society for their natural superiority. As far as Nietzsche was concerned, there was no other way to account for how Christianity had become a major world religion than to suggest that Christianity created concepts such as sin and guilt to cut the rich and powerful down to size.

It was Nietzsche's suspicion that all human relationships are driven by the desire for power over others. He found Christianity to be especially insidious because, rather than admitting that it desires power over the minds of all humanity, it proclaims itself to be a religion of love. But in fact, Scripture tells us that Christ willingly became powerless so that human beings might know the power of God. Christ set aside the prerogatives of deity to become a servant; He became poor that we might become rich. Perhaps Nietzsche is correct in arguing that human relationships are often governed by the desire for power. However, it is clear that in the encounter between God and man, it is the infinite God who submits Himself to the limitations of humanity.

Sin and Guilt as Human Conventions

One of most disturbing aspects of contemporary culture is the nihilistic worldview of many of our youth. The horrible assault on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in

1999 revealed how deeply alienated many young people are from society. It is apparent that Harris and Kleybold felt entirely justified in killing their classmates out of a sense of outrage at how they had been treated by the more popular students at school. Incredibly, they were convinced that their heinous act would be glorified in Hollywood and entertained themselves by asking who would portray them in the blockbuster movies that would follow their killing spree. What is especially disturbing is the question of how such sociopathic tendencies arise in a prosperous Colorado suburb.

According to Scripture, human beings are sinners in need of redemption. All of us stand guilty before a holy God and only the shed blood of the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, can cleanse us from the power and penalty of our sin. Therefore, a guilty conscience can be a positive thing in that it enables us to respond to the gospel message. But in contemporary culture, as Senator Daniel Moynahan has stated, there has been a tendency to "define deviancy down." Acts that were considered immoral or even criminal in the recent past have been accepted as normal, so that our threshold of what is morally acceptable continues to lower. Additionally, in our therapeutic society anything that makes a person feel better about herself is exalted, while feelings of guilt and shame are discouraged. In a certain sense, this thinking is part of the heritage of Nietzsche.

According to Nietzsche, human beings developed a sense of guilt out of the]financial relationship between a creditor and a debtor.{3} Nietzsche maintained that the similarity between the German words for *guilt* and *debt* were indications that financial obligations were the original source of a sense of obligation toward others. Of course, a debtor is obligated to his creditor, and in ancient times the debtor would pledge some form of collateral in case he were unable to repay the debt. This of course gave the creditor power over the debtor, even to the extent that he could inflict cruelty upon the

debtor to extract his "pound of flesh." According to Nietzsche, this gave rise to the idea that suffering could balance out our debts and is the basis for the biblical account of Christ's work of the cross.{4} The problem arose when human beings somehow internalized the original sense of financial obligation, so that what had previously been simply a matter of external punishment evolved into the guilty conscience.

Nietzsche's contention was that a feeling of guilt is destructive and prevents us from acting in accordance with our noble instincts. But the question is, How can human beings be noble without acknowledging their own limitations? The denial of a sense of guilt, the denial of conscience, inevitably leads to pride and the arrogant assumption that we are accountable to no one. While it would be unjust to suggest that Nietzsche encouraged acts such as the Columbine shootings, it is also clear that Nietzsche recognized that a sense of guilt leads us to conclude that we are accountable to someone else for our actions. Wanting to insure that human beings did not conclude that they were accountable to God for their actions, his only option was to conclude that the guilty conscience is a figment of our imaginations. Unfortunately, incidents such as Columbine are not.

God is Dead! Now We Can Really Live!

Who can forget the famous cover of *Time* magazine, which asked the question "Is God Dead?" Many people may have dismissed such an absurd question, as if it makes sense to say that the eternal God could pass away. But that is precisely the point. In Nietzsche, the announcement of God's death is simply to force people to acknowledge that they no longer care about God. He has been removed from His throne by the advancements of science and technology and has little to say to modern man. According to Nietzsche, God choked to death on pity.{5}

On the other hand, Nietzsche claims that *we* have killed God.

It is not that these statements are contradictory, but that Nietzsche viewed "God" as a concept, not as a person. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Zarathustra setting out to deliver the startling news that God is dead, but his first words are directed to the sun. While to the casual reader this may seem absurd, this is actually a vivid reference to the philosophy of Plato. And according to Nietzsche, Christianity is nothing more than Plato's philosophy dressed up as a religion. The whole point of Nietzsche's philosophy is to deliver us from the teachings of Christianity, which he called the "Platonism of the people." Nietzsche believed that both Plato and Christianity overemphasized the distinction between human existence and the realm of eternity; in order to effectively demolish Christianity, he felt it necessary to destroy the foundations of Plato's philosophy as well.

Plato lived in an era that was concerned about the implications of change. Because Plato denied that we can truly know anything that is changeable, he conceived of an ideal world populated by what he called "forms." The forms were eternal and unchanging models for the objects that we experience every day, and Plato's concern was with how we can come to know these forms. Part of his answer to that question was his conception of the ultimate form, the form of the Good. The form of the Good is what illumines the soul's understanding, so Plato utilized the sun as the most fitting symbol for this form. Later, some Christian theologians baptized Plato's philosophy by claiming that the forms were ideas in the mind of God, but what critics like Nietzsche find so disturbing is that both Plato and Christianity seem to place more emphasis on an afterlife than on day-to-day existence. It was his desire that we recognize the value and pleasures of this life, but to do so he completely rejected a transcendent world. The question is whether he is justified in claiming that Christianity denies the validity of this life by focusing solely on a heavenly afterlife.

While it is true that a variety of movements within Christianity, such as the monastics, have devalued earthly existence as a mere prelude to the afterlife, this is a far cry from claiming that Christianity *itself* is the religious equivalent of Plato's other-worldly philosophy. St. Augustine, who was a devoted student of Plato, claimed that Plato was a valuable tool that helped lead him to Christianity. But the one thing that he found lacking in the Platonists was the teaching of Scripture that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh. God himself has come to live amongst us! The incarnation of God in Christ means that human existence is vitally important. God himself lived as a man. Rather than devaluing life, Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Nietzsche the Prophet?

As we close our examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking and its consequences for Christian faith we should note his conviction that terms such as *sin, morality,* and *God* are simply human conventions with no reality supporting them. He hoped to overcome these concepts by taking us back in history to discover how we came to these "erroneous" beliefs. According to Nietzsche, the concept of a God who rewards believers with eternal life has devalued human existence. Consequently, he attempted to devalue any belief associated with a transcendent being or an afterlife and emphasized overcoming Christian standards for morality. His ideal was the *overman*, unique individuals who were not restrained by what society conceived as right or wrong. The problem is that, when taken to its extreme, his philosophy has been utilized to justify a wide variety of crimes. In 1924, two students at the University of Chicago justified their murder of a twelve-year-old boy by quoting from Nietzsche. And of course, Hitler assumed that Nietzsche's philosophy called for world domination by Germany and the ruthless elimination of all its enemies. Many therefore assume that Nietzsche was some type of

proto-Nazi.

Nietzsche would have had little sympathy for Hitler and was not an anti-Semite as some have claimed. These accusations are common, but cannot be the result of actually reading his works. What we can say is that Nietzsche attempted to replace the good news of Jesus Christ with a pseudo-gospel based on the assertion that Christianity was a fabrication that has hindered mankind for centuries. The Bible tells us that Christ has set us free through His atoning work on the cross; Nietzsche insists that such a story is what has placed us in bondage. Like many utopians, Nietzsche denied the inherent sinfulness of the human heart and insisted that the idea of God was what had prevented mankind from reaching its highest potential. Obviously, evangelical Christianity and Nietzsche are in severe disagreement on most subjects.

Still, Nietzsche does have a message for the Christian community. Considering Nietzsche's contempt for Christianity, that would seem to rule him out as a mouthpiece for God. However, we also note that pagan kings such as Cyrus of Persia (Ezra 1:1-4) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:34-35) were spokesman for God in particular instances. So to paraphrase John 1:46, "Can anything good come out of Nietzsche?"

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of reading Nietzsche is his emphasis on our motives. Just as Jesus accused the Pharisees for disguising their hardened hearts with outward acts of service and sacrifice, Nietzsche demonstrates keen awareness of the subtle ways we can deceive even ourselves. One of Nietzsche's favorite accusations is that Christians can speak about loving their enemies, but they have also been known to comfort themselves with thoughts of those same enemies roasting in eternal hell-fire. Perhaps then one of the reasons Christians avoid reading Nietzsche is that he can make us feel so uncomfortable. Do we give to the Church out of love for God or perhaps simply for the tax deduction? What about our service in the church? Are we motivated by the applause of

man, or by our love for God? The Christian cannot read Nietzsche without feeling challenged on these questions. Rather than simply dismissing his radical critique of Christianity, the church would be well-served to understand how Nietzsche has influenced modern culture, and in turn to reflect on how we can demonstrate the love of God to a dying world.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1967), 33.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 27-28.
3. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 62.
4. Ibid., 65.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

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