

The Challenge of Doubts and Prodigals

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Session Webpage: <http://www.worldvieweyes.org/leaders2018.html>¹

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Room For Doubt creates an atmosphere that invites questions—even doubts—about the Christian faith. It seeks to strengthen the faith of committed Christians and address doubts among those with a Christian heritage. It features a resourceful website that allows submitted questions as well as a six-week message and small group series for churches, Christian schools, and campus ministries.

Introduction

- A. The parable of the seed and soils (Matthew 13) (Also see Mark 4 and Luke 8.)
 1. Seed beside the road.
 - a. Birds eat it up (4)
 - b. Those who hear but do not understand it are snatched away by the evil one (19).
 2. Seed on rocky places with shallow soil.
 - a. Immediately springs up but scorched by the sun and withers away (5-6).
 - b. Those who immediately receive with joy, but who fall away because of no firm root and because of affliction and persecution (20-21).
 3. Seed among thorns.
 - a. Thorns come up and choke them out (7).
 - b. Those who hear the word but are unfruitful because of worry and the deceitfulness of wealth (22).
 4. Seed on good soil.
 - a. Yields a good crop—30, 60, 100 fold (8).
 - b. Those who hear and understand and who bear fruit (23)
- B. Observations on the parable.
 1. The seed is the word of God (Lk. 8:11); it is “good seed” (Mt. 13:24, 27).
 2. A spiritual battle (the evil one—Mt. 13:19; Satan—Mk. 4:15; the devil—Lk. 8:12).
 3. The importance of *understanding* (rocky-soil ones do not understand (Mt. 13:19); the good-soil ones do understand (Mt. 13:23).
 4. We have the privilege and obligation to spread the seed.
 5. We have the implied obligation to prepare the soil.
 6. The real objective: bear fruit—not merely hear, or accept, or receive it with joy.
 7. Cultural and individual conditions can adversely affect fruit-bearing (e.g. affliction, persecution, worries, the deceitfulness of wealth, pleasure of this life).

¹ The session webpage provides this handout (with answers), presentation slides, recordings, and lists of book and website resources. Additional resources are available at <http://www.roomfordoubt.com/recommended-resources.html>. Materials for presentations by Dr. Knopp are accessible at <http://worldvieweyes.org/Events.html>.

I. The Soil of Our Culture and the Church

A. The Rise of the **NONES**—the Religiously Detached (see Pew Research surveys.)

1. Adults: 1990 8.1%; 2007 15.3%; 2012 19.3%; 2014 _____%.
2. 18-29 year olds: 2007 22%; 2012 32%.
 - a. 2014: Older Millennials (25-33): _____%.
 - b. 2014: Younger Millennials (18-24): _____%.
3. GenZ: 13-18 year olds (see the 2018 “Gen Z” report by Barna)
 - a. No religion: 34%
 - b. “Atheist”: 13% of Gen Z; 7% Millennials; 6% Gen X; 6% of all adults)

B. The lack of a **“Biblical Worldview”** (Barna research).

1. “Born again” adults? 45%.
2. “Biblical worldview”:² All Adults? _____%. All Teens? _____%.
3. “Biblical worldview”: Those 18-23? _____%.
4. “Integrated Disciples”:³ ≥65: _____; 50-64: _____; 30-49: _____; 18-29: _____.

C. **Positive perceptions** of churched teens (Barna research).

1. Learned Bible stories: _____
2. Learned about Bible People: _____
3. Had a fun and positive experience: _____

D. **Problematic realities** of churched teens (Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*).

1. Significantly doubted their faith? _____%.
2. Can’t ask their most pressing life questions at church? _____%.
3. At some point, felt like rejecting their parents’ faith? _____%.
4. No longer active in church in their 20s? _____%.

E. The church **“dropout” problem** (see Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*)

1. **Nomads**: Not church-involved but consider themselves Christians. Wrestling with faith. (About 40% of youth with Christian background have a period of “spiritual nomadism”)
2. **Prodigals**: “No longer Christian”
 - a. 11% of young adults with Christian background de-converted entirely.
 - b. “All things considered, a young Christian has about 1:9 odds [11%] of losing his or her faith entirely” (Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle loc. 1034).
3. **Exiles**: Still invested in Christian faith, but feel stuck (or lost) between culture and the church.

II. Factors behind the Doubts that Lead to Dropouts

A. Prominence of popular skeptics

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006).
2. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007).

² For the Barna Research Group, someone with a “biblical worldview” made a personal commitment to Christ; trusts in Christ for salvation; and accepts absolute moral truth, biblical moral standards, Satan’s existence, and Jesus’ sinless life.

³ See the American Culture and Faith Institute survey (Feb. 2017). “Integrated Disciples” are those “who are designated as having a biblical worldview based on integrating their beliefs and behavior into a lifestyle that reflects foundational biblical principles.”

3. Bart Ehrman (Professor of Religious Studies, Univ. of North Carolina)
 - a. *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (2014).
 - b. *Forged Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (2011).
4. Increasing *intellectual* skepticism and doubt

Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*: Students leave faith behind primarily because of intellectual doubt and skepticism (p. 89). “Why did they fall away from the faith in which they were raised?” (open-ended question): 32% said they left faith behind because of intellectual skepticism or doubt. (“It didn’t make any sense anymore.” “Some stuff is too far-fetched for me to believe.” “I think scientifically and there is no real proof.” “Too many questions that can’t be answered.”)

B. Easy Internet Accessibility

Larry Taunton: “Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity”: “When our participants were asked to cite key influences in their conversion to atheism—people, books, seminars, etc.—we expected to hear frequent references to the names of the ‘New Atheists.’ We did not. Not once. Instead, we heard vague references to videos they had watched on YouTube or website forums” (*The Atlantic* online [June 6, 2013]).

C. More “High-Information Seekers” (see Larry Barnett’s Next Generation Project at <http://www.projectnextgen.org/>).

“We found that the presence of doubt much more strongly predicted leaving Christianity for high information seekers [H]igh information seekers with doubts are about two to four times more likely to disconnect from Christianity than other doubters who are not high information seekers.... According to our research, high information seekers are not intrinsically more difficult to disciple, but only when they have unanswered questions or unresolved doubts about Christianity’s truth claims.”

D. Summary of why churching teens are leaving. (See Brian Housman, “Why are Teens Leaving the Faith?” *Lifeway* [June 17, 2013]) [<http://m.lifeway.com/Article/ministry-family-Why-are-Teens-Leaving-the-Faith>]

1. Shallow belief system.
2. No room for doubt.
3. Exclusive faith: How can Christianity be the only way?
4. No answers for opposition (philosophy & science).
 - a. The church is “anti-intellectual” (18% of Millennials)
 - b. The church is “anti-science” (25% of Millennials)
5. The church is intolerant.
6. The church not relevant (personally and professionally).

III. What Can You and Your Church Do?

A. Emphasize the “GOOD news” of Christ and the Christian faith.

“Our research shows that churches sometimes, whether intentionally or not, present a predominantly legalistic gospel that young people translate into a checklist of do’s and don’ts. This is what Dallas Willard called the ‘gospel of sin management.’ This checklist leads many young people to experience a burdened life of guilt, shame and failure, instead of a thriving relationship with Jesus that transforms their life and bears fruit. It’s because of this many young people depart from the church in search of communities that have a more holistic understanding of the gospel.” (**Irene Cho, Fuller Youth Institute**; cited in Barna, *GenZ*, 33).

B. Cultivate an “atmosphere of humility.” (1 Pet 5:5; Col 3:12; Acts 20:19; Phil 2:2–3).

David Kinnaman: Over 33% of young adults say that “Christians are too confident they know all the answers” (*You Lost Me*, Kindle 2119).

C. Address the “WHY” of faith (e.g. 1 Pet 3:14–16; Col 2:8; 2 Cor 10:5; Titus 1:9; Jude 3).

D. Encourage dialogue on doubts (intellectual, emotional, spiritual)

Rich Knopp: “The prognosis for faith greatly depends on the proper diagnosis of doubt.”

Dallas Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness*: “... the great problem facing the gospel of Jesus Christ is not the doubt that is outside the church; it is the doubt that is inside the church. We need to be able to deal with doubt lovingly, helpfully, and especially without ever scolding or shaming anyone for doubting. We must allow people to be who they are and then be able to meet them where they are” (25).

1. E.g. Dan Brown: Church leader’s reply to young Dan Brown’s questions about God: “Nice boys don’t ask those questions.”
2. David Kinnaman: “I believe that *unexpressed* doubt is one of the most powerful destroyers of faith” (*You Lost Me*, Kindle location 3088).
3. Irene Cho (Fuller Youth Institute):

“FYI’s research reveals that providing young people with safe spaces to ask difficult questions, express doubts, learn how to integrate with their world and engage with internal struggle is absolutely crucial to cultivating faith. **Doubt is not what kills faith; silence is....** Instead of silencing young people, it’s imperative that leaders and parents help young people develop critical thoughts about faith and life. Sadly, many young people in our research shared that church was the last place they felt safe as they wrestled with their identity, future and life” (cited in Barna, Gen Z, 33; emphasis added).

4. Larry Barnett (NextGen Research):

“When questions and doubts about Christianity are successfully resolved, Millennials and Generation X raised in Christian households are highly likely to embrace Christianity as adults. Under these circumstances, **the attrition rate from Christianity of those raised in Christian households is less than 2% among all generations, meaning over 98% persistency in the Christian faith among those whose doubts have been successfully resolved.**”

E. Expand your church curriculum and change your own resource priorities.

1. 24% of Millennials: Faith is “not relevant” to their career or interests (*You Lost Me*).
2. 25% of Millennials: Church is “anti-science”; yet only 1% of youth pastors addressed a subject within the last year (*You Lost Me*, loc. 2189).
3. Cf. Song: “The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s book for me.”
 - a. Biblical *illiteracy* is a big problem.
 - b. Biblical *irrelevance* is arguably an even bigger problem.
4. Connect the Bible to e.g. the intellect, science, and one’s career. (See Barna, “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church”)
 - a. Youth FOUR times more likely to stay ACTIVE, IF they learned at church “how the Bible applies to my field or career interests” (29% vs. 7%).
 - b. Youth FOUR times more likely to stay ACTIVE, IF they receive helpful input from a pastor about education (21% vs. 5%).
5. Many excellent resources available (see list below).

F. One suggestion: Do the Room For Doubt Six-Week Series (see

<http://www.roomfordoubt.com/series/rfd-series-overview.html>).

1. Message manuscripts, adult and youth discussion guides; many videos for promotion, leader training, sermon bumpers, discussion starters.
2. Content and resources by Mark Mittelberg, Garry Poole, Lee Strobel, and Rich Knopp.
3. Everything available online to download instantly (samples available).

Resources on Understanding the Soil of Culture & Church⁴

- American Culture and Faith Institute. "Groundbreaking ACFI Survey Reveals How Many Adults Have a Biblical Worldview" (Feb. 27, 2017). <https://www.culturefaith.com/groundbreaking-survey-by-acfi-reveals-how-many-american-adults-have-a-biblical-worldview>.
- American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). "American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population" (2008). See https://secularstudents.org/sites/secularstudents.org/files/NONES_08.pdf. Links to several studies at <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/>.
- Barna Group (www.barna.org). Full of statistical resources and guidance for church leaders. Led by David Kinnaman.
- Barna Group. "GEN Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation." 2018 Report. Replay of simulcast video of the report's release is here: http://www.whoisgenz.com/?utm_source=Barna+Update+List&utm_campaign=7bbe080081-GENZ_CAMPAIGN_2018_I_25&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8560a0e52e-7bbe080081-171981205&mc_cid=7bbe080081&mc_eid=be5bccb035.
- Barna Group. "Competing Worldviews Influence Today's Christians" (May 9, 2017). <https://www.barna.com/research/competing-worldviews-influence-todays-christians>.
- Barna, George and David Kinnaman, ed. *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Tyndale, 2014). See www.barna.org/churchless.
- Barnett, Larry. "A General Introduction to the Next Generation Project: Understanding and Reversing Christianity's Recent Decline in the U.S" (2015). See www.projectnextgen.org.
- Kinnaman, David and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Baker, 2011).
- Lee, Morgan. "Many Practicing Christians Agree with Marxism (and Other Competing Worldviews)." *Christianity Today* (May 10, 2017). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/may/many-practicing-christians-agree-marxism-worldviews-barna.html>.
- Lifeway Research (www.lifewayresearch.com). Led by Ed Stetzer.
- Pew Research Center. "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation" (Oct. 9, 2012).
- Pew Research Center. "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (May 12, 2015). See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.
- Shaw, Hadyn. *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future is Bright* (Tyndale, 2015).
- Wallace, J. Warner. "Update: Are Young People Really Leaving Christianity?" Blog on Jan. 29, 2018. A great compilation of many studies on the subject. <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2018/are-young-people-really-leaving-christianity/>. Also see the website's "youth" section for ideas about how to strengthen the faith of Christian youth and kids.
- White, James Emery. *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Baker, 2014).
- _____. *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Baker, 2017).
- _____. Church and Culture website (<http://www.churchandculture.org>). Offers good resources and an excellent weekly blog from James Emery White at <http://www.churchandculture.org/blog.asp>.

Resources on Cultivating the Soil with a Christian Worldview

- Keller, Timothy. *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (Viking, 2016). See the book review in the February issue of the *Christian Standard* at <http://www.christianstandard.com/2017/02/helping-the-skeptical-see-god/>.
- Knopp, Richard. "Your Faith Is In Danger: Prepare for the Assault." Video presentation for high school youth. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K64sZ3mInso>.
- _____. "Learning to Love God in a World of Growing Skepticism and Secularism." 2016 NACC session. <http://worldvieweyes.org/NACC16.html> and video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuiEWpf6Ohw&feature=youtu.be>.
- _____. "Where Will We Go Without God?" *Christian Standard* 149 (June 2014): 38-40. Online at <http://christianstandard.com/2014/06/where-will-we-go-without-god/>.
- Koukl, Gregory. *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Zondervan, 2009).

⁴ Additional recommended resources for church leaders and Christian youth can be accessed at <http://www.roomfordoubt.com/recommended-resources.html>.

- McDowell, Sean, ed. *Apologetics for a New Generation: A Biblical and Culturally Relevant Approach to Talking About God* (Harvest House, 2009).
- McFarland, Alex, and Jason Jimenez. *Abandoned Faith: Why Millennials Are Walking Away and How You Can Lead Them Home*. (Tyndale, 2017).
- Mittelberg, Mark. *The Reason Why Faith Makes Sense* (Tyndale, 2011). A small book (153 pages) recommended for the Room For Doubt six-week church and small group series. Volume discounts are available.
- Poole, Garry, and Lee Strobel. *Don't All Religions Lead to God? (Tough Questions)* (Zondervan, 2003).
- _____. *How Does Anyone Know God Exists? (Tough Questions)* (Zondervan, 2003).
- _____. *How Could God Allow Suffering and Evil? (Tough Questions)* (Zondervan, 2003).
- Powell, Doug. *Holman Quicksource Guide to Christian Apologetics* (B&H Publishing, 2006).
- Powell, Kara E. and Chap Clark. *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Zondervan, 2011).
- Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin. *Churches Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Baker, 2016). See the accompanying website at <http://churchesgrowingyoung.com>.
- Putman, Jim, and Bill Putman. *Hope for the Prodigal: Bringing the Lost, Wandering, and Rebellious Home* (Baker, 2017).
- Stonestreet, John, and Brett Kunkle. *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World*. (David C Cook, 2017).
- Whorton, Mark. *Quicksource Guide to Understanding Creation* (B&H Publishing, 2011).
- Zacharias, Ravi and Norman Geisler, eds. *Is Your Church Ready? Motivating Leaders to Live an Apologetic Life* (Zondervan, 2003).
- www.roomfordoubt.com. Website that encourages (and responds to) questions about faith with articles and videos. The program offers a six-week curriculum series for churches on basic questions of the Christian faith that includes messages, adult discussion guide, youth discussion guide, and numerous resources, including videos. Recommended resources are periodically updated here: www.roomfordoubt.com/recommended-resources.html.
- www.worldvieweyes.org. Provides presentation resources by Dr. Rich Knopp.