



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 17, 2019

## Survey: Two Out of Three Teenagers Leave the Church as Young Adults

To most, [LifeWay's survey](#) confirms what they think they already know: Young people are leaving the church once they get out of the house and onto a college campus.

LifeWay Research, a creation of the Southern Baptist Convention, asked 2,000 young adults between the ages of 23 and 30 (who had a history of regular church attendance while teenagers) 55 questions about their faith. Said LifeWay: "Two-thirds of [those] who attended a Protestant church regularly for a least a year as a teenager [said] they also dropped out for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22."



There was scarcely any good news in the study, said Scott McConnell, LifeWay Research's executive director: "The good news for Christian leaders is that churches don't seem to be losing more students [today] than they were 10 years ago." He added: "The reality is that Protestant churches continue to see the new generation walk away as young adults. Regardless of any external factors, the Protestant church is slowly shrinking from within."

Those surveyed were asked why. A third said they went to college and stopped going to church. Another third said that local congregations were filled with hypocrites and judgmental types with which they wanted nothing to do. Nearly 30 percent said they didn't feel "connected" to the church anymore, while a quarter said they disagreed with the church's position on current political and/or social issues. A quarter (percentages exceed 100 percent due to multiple responses from those surveyed) said that work kept them so busy they didn't have time to attend church.

Ben Trueblood, director of student ministry at LifeWay, said that "for the most part, young people aren't leaving the church out of bitterness, the influence of college atheists, or a renunciation of their faith. What [our] research tells us [is that] there was nothing about the church experience or faith foundation of those teenagers that caused them to seek out a connection to a local church once they entered a new phase of life."

There was some hope, nevertheless: "We can be encouraged that some return," said Trueblood. More than half of those who kept attending or returned after a period of time said it was because "church was a vital part of my relationship with God" and "I wanted the church to help guide my decisions for everyday life." A quarter of them said they experienced the feeling that God was calling them back.

In other words, the Gospel that was preached to those 2,000 teenagers didn't stick with the vast majority of them, but it did "stick" with a significant minority.

Indeed, how to reach young people, and how to get them to accept the Gospel and have it stick with them through thick and thin, has been a great challenge for church leaders for decades.



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Churches have tried to appeal to young people by offering “contemporary” services instead of (or alongside) traditional services. Rock bands with young females with untrained voices have been installed to the chagrin of the older generation. The overall “feel” of many churches has been modified to better fit into contemporary society. A single example will suffice: A local church with which this writer is acquainted recently changed its logo from a cross on a blue background to a new logo just showing the first two letters of the name of the church with nothing showing any relationship to the cross of Christ. The logo was developed for the church by a local secular PR firm hired to make the logo more relevant to the new culture.

Other ministries, such as The Salt Company, a Southern Baptist Ministry on the campus of Iowa State University, teach believers to present the Gospel to their peers. Said its campus director, Kendra Gustafson, “We have found that discipling and equipping our student leaders to reach out to their peers has been probably the most effective form of ministry ... [we] give them courage and ... boldness to ... welcome people in.”

But once “in” will they stay “in”?

Part of the answer may come from a libertarian author of influence around the turn of the 20th century, Albert Jay Nock. Nock told the story of being asked his opinion about how to reach “the masses” with a great new idea developed by an acquaintance — a “very learned man” and “one of the three or four really first-class minds that Europe produced in his generation”, wrote Nock — an idea in which “I could find no defect.”

Nock’s story was published by and is available online at the Mises Institute, entitled “Isaiah’s Job.”

Nock retold the story of the prophet Isaiah’s call using the vernacular of his day:

In the year of Uzziah’s death, the Lord commissioned the prophet to go out and warn the people of the wrath to come. “Tell them what a worthless lot they are.” He said, “Tell them what is wrong, and why and what is going to happen unless they have a change of heart and straighten up. Don’t mince matters. Make it clear that they are positively down to their last chance. Give it to them good and strong and keep on giving it to them.”

“I suppose perhaps I ought to tell you,” He added, “that it won’t do any good. The official class and their intelligentsia will turn up their noses at you and the masses will not even listen. They will all keep on in their own ways until they carry everything down to destruction, and you will probably be lucky if you get out with your life.”

Isaiah had been very willing to take on the job — in fact, he had asked for it — but the prospect put a new face on the situation. It raised the obvious question: Why, if all that were so — if the enterprise were to be a failure from the start — was there any sense in starting it?

“Ah,” the Lord said, “you do not get the point. There is a Remnant there that you know nothing about. They are obscure, unorganized, inarticulate, each one rubbing along as best he can. They need to be encouraged and braced up because when everything has gone completely to the dogs, they are the ones who will come back and build up a new society; and meanwhile, your preaching will reassure them and keep them hanging on. Your job is to take care of the Remnant, so be off now and set about it.”

Nock wrote to preachers, teachers, and any other promoters of virtue, noting that Isaiah

preached to the masses only in the sense that he preached publicly. Anyone who liked might listen;



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anyone who liked might pass by. He knew that the Remnant would listen; and knowing also that nothing was to be expected of the masses under any circumstances, he made no specific appeal to them, did not accommodate his message to their measure in any way, and did not care two straws whether they heeded it or not. As a modern publisher might put it, he was not worrying about circulation or about advertising. Hence, with all such obsessions quite out of the way, he was in a position to do his level best, without fear or favor, and answerable only to his august Boss.

In other words, Isaiah didn't water down his message. He didn't try to make it palatable or flexible to meet the changing mores of the culture. He gave it to the Israelites "good and hard," and kept doing so regardless. Nickels and noses meant nothing to Isaiah.

Likewise, churches today trying to reach people with the Gospel message should not change the message to appeal to modern culture, as such efforts rarely work. Likewise, putting on very "contemporary" services does not seem to produce dedicated Christians with lasting commitments to the church. Paradoxically, attempts to make the church more "relevant" appear to make it less attractive. Perhaps this is because the Gospel, when given the "cool treatment," loses its appeal as something life-changing and countercultural. The Gospel message itself is very relevant to our modern times; the problem is, it's often not preached in our churches anymore.

*Image: RapidEye via iStock / Getty Images Plus*

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