Contents

1– Good-bye, God

My friend Abe was raised as a Christian, but abandoned his faith during college.

"I don't know what happened," he said with a shrug. "I just left it."

When I heard about Abe's "deconversion," my mind jumped to the last time I'd seen him. It was at a Promise Keepers rally the year after we graduated from high school. I remember being surprised to see him there; neither of us had been strong Christians in school. But watching him standing next to his father in the coliseum, it was clear something had clicked. As the voices of twenty thousand men lifted in unison, Abe squeezed his eyes shut and extended one slender arm skyward. He seemed solemn yet peaceful, totally absorbed in God's presence.

It was a powerful evening. I can still hear the words of one of the event's speakers. He wasn't the most eloquent in the lineup, and he had a slight speech impediment, but his passion for Christ was palpable.

"I don't know about you guys," he said. "But I want to

run the race so hard that when I reach the end, I fall exhausted into the arms of Jesus."

After he spoke, the stadium was silent. In that moment I think we all felt the same way. We didn't want to just hobble through our spiritual journeys. We wanted to sprint. When we came to the end, we wanted to collapse into the arms of Jesus.

I'd considered myself a Christian ever since my dad walked into my room one night in 1983, knelt beside my lower bunk, and led me in the sinner's prayer. I was five years old when that happened and probably didn't understand exactly what I was saying. And yet, it was real. It wasn't until my late teens, however, when I carefully read the gospels, that the faith truly became my own.

When I saw Abe worshiping at the rally, I assumed he had undergone a similar transformation. We were both pastors' kids. We had both gone through the proverbial rebellious phase, but that didn't mean we didn't believe.

How could the guy I'd watched lost in worship turn cold toward God?

That's why I was shocked by his decision to leave the faith. I was a little curious too. What had prompted Abe, who was my age, and from a remarkably similar background, to defect? How could the guy I'd watched lost in worship turn cold toward God?

EXODUS NOW

It's a question that's being asked a lot these days. Young adults are fleeing the faith in record numbers. Abe may be a riddle, but he's not rare.

Religious beliefs are elusive targets for conventional research. No survey or study can fully probe the heart of a person, much less the mind of God. So when it comes to assessing how many people are joining or leaving the faith, we're dealing with educated guesses. To steal the apostle Paul's beautiful phrase, "we see through a glass darkly."

Still a number of recent surveys give us important clues about the emerging generation's patterns of belief. And it's not a pretty picture. Among young adults, there's a major shift taking place—away from Christianity.

The first indicators are church attendance and involvement. Here the statistics are grim. According to Rainer Research 70 percent of youth leave church by the time they are twenty-two years old.[1] Barna Group estimates that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be "disengaged" by the time they are twenty-nine years old.[2] Unlike older church dropouts, these young "leavers" are unlikely to seek out alternative forms of Christian community, such as home churches and small groups. When they leave church, many leave the faith as well. One commentator put 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.[3]

I don't need a "big fat marker" to perform this experiment. I've watched it play out among my friends over the past decade. The social networking website Facebook has emerged as the younger generation's preferred way to communicate with large numbers of

friends. It's a great way to keep tabs on people from the past. As I scan the online accounts of former youth group friends, the drift from God is unmistakable. Many no longer even wear the Christian label. Others have not explicitly renounced the faith, but their online pictures, comments, and profiles reveal lifestyles and attitudes few would describe as Christian. Some were particularly surprising to me. Under the "religious views" category in her profile, one previously devout Christian had simply written: "God has left the building." Another shock came from a sweet, soft-spoken girl who used to sing on my church's worship team. Now her album of pictures looked like an advertisement for *Girls Gone Wild*. She had sent me a message wanting to catch up. I wrote back and asked if she was "still into Jesus." Her response said it all—I didn't get one.

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Of course Facebook accounts hardly serve as reliable gauges of spiritual health. When it comes to most of my friends, I probably won't discover where they are at in their relationships with God. I might not have the opportunity to see them again face-to-face, let alone delve into their most deeply held beliefs. Thankfully, I did have that opportunity with Abe.

"I FELT NOTHING"

Fast-forward six years from that Promise Keepers rally and Abe's sitting in my studio apartment, slapping a cigarette from a pack of American Spirits. The intervening years had taken us

each down very different paths. I was married. He was single. I was headed to seminary. He was wrapping up law school. I was an active Christian. He'd rejected the faith. At the time of his visit, he was celebrating a last stint of student-life freedom by motorbiking across the United States. I offered him my futon when he rolled into town. It wasn't much, but compared to the nights he'd been spending in his pop-up tent, it probably felt like the Marriott.

We talked late into the night. Since high school he'd lived an exciting and eclectic life. I felt a twinge of jealousy as he described experiences that seemed lifted from a Jack Kerouac novel. He had lived in London, and worked as a bartender. He backpacked through India. He spent summers tree planting in northern Alberta, a lucrative seasonal gig that funded his nomadic existence. Somewhere in Asia he suspended his travels to meditate in a Buddhist monastery. He'd become a vegetarian.

"I can't see how people can justify using animals as a resource," he said as he fried up a delicious feast of falafel balls for me and my wife.

His experiences had changed him—most significantly in his views about God. When I broached the subject, his voice grew quiet.

"When I left the faith, I thought it would feel really bad. I assumed I'd come right back. But I didn't feel bad. I felt nothing."

Though he was philosophical about his departure, he didn't regret it. In fact he felt liberated. And he was slightly combative.

"Can you honestly say that Christianity has been good for humanity?" he asked.

His tone was equally critical when he talked about his parents, especially his father whom he described as "a right-winger."

If I had been saddened by Abe's decision, his father was devastated. When he heard of Abe's decision, he rushed him the book *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, hoping it might bring him back.

It didn't.

Abe read the book, even enjoyed it, but didn't change his decision to bid his faith farewell.

"Growing up I had an uncle that wasn't a Christian and we prayed for him all the time," Abe said wistfully. "They probably pray for me like that now."

A DIFFERENT UNIVERSE

Why do young people leave the faith?

Whenever I ask people inside the church I receive some variation of the same answer. They leave because of moral compromise, I am told. A teenage girl goes off to college and starts to party. A young man moves in with his girlfriend. Soon the conflict between their beliefs and behavior becomes unbearable. Something has to give. 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 don't be fooled. These are just excuses, smoke screens designed to hide their real reason for going astray. "They change their creed to match their conduct," as my parents would say.

There's even an academic basis for this explanation. Psychologists call this "cognitive dissonance." Basically the theory goes like this. Opposing beliefs or behaviors cause psychological distress. We seek to resolve the tension by dropping or modifying one of those contradictory beliefs or behaviors. Once we do, our psyche's harmony is restored.

I think there's a lot of truth to that hypothesis—more than most young leavers would care to admit (and we'll explore this reason for leaving later in the book). "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting," wrote G. K. Chesterton. "It's been

found difficult and left untried."[4] Even practicing Christians can attest to the truth encapsulated in that clever verbal twist. Living the Christian life is hard, and when you're falling short, as we all do, it's easy to forfeit relationship with an invisible deity in order to indulge sinful, real-world desires.

For Abe, I'm sure moral compromise played a role. Christian morality didn't exactly jibe with his new lifestyle, which included relationships with the opposite sex that fell outside the biblical model. It would have been difficult for him to hold a Christian worldview while engaging in a pattern of behavior that opposed it.

I saw that his parents' attempts to call him back to God were futile because he inhabited a different universe.

Yet the moral compromise explanation didn't tell the whole story. He had other reasons for leaving, and they weren't just smoke screens. The more we talked, the more I believed that they were at the root of why he left. He balked at Christian entanglement with conservative politics. He pointed out what he saw as a lack of compassion for the poor among Christians. And he wasn't moved by the apologetics of yesteryear. Ultimately I saw that his parents' attempts to call him back to God were futile because he inhabited a different universe, one populated with ideas and sensibilities that were completely alien to them. I'd soon begin to discover the laws of this new universe and find out just how many other young adults had followed Abe through the wormhole.