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Part 1: An Epidemic on Our Hands

Epidemic (Ep-i-dem-ic)¹

1. A disease or anything resembling a disease; attacking or affecting many individuals in a community or a population simultaneously.
2. Anything which takes possession of the minds of people as an epidemic does of their bodies; as, an epidemic of terror.

A majority of twenty-somethings — 61% of today's young adults — had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying).

— George Barna²

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1. Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc., *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*. Retrieved December 09, 2008
 2. <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twenty-somethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>.

CHAPTER 1



Already Gone

Guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge” — which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you (1 Tim. 6:20–21).

I dare you. I dare you to try it this Sunday. Look to the right, and look to the left. While the pastor delivers his message, while the worship team sings their songs, while the youth pastor gives his announcements, look to the right and look to the left. Look at the children and look at the teens around you. Many of them will be familiar faces. They are the faces of your friends’ sons and daughters. They are the friends that your children bring home after youth group. They are *your* children . . . the ones who have been faithfully following you to church for years.

Now, imagine that two-thirds of them have just disappeared.

That’s right, *two-thirds* of them — the ones who go to secular school, even those homeschooled or sent to Christian school, the boys

and the girls, the kids who are leaders of the school's Bible club, the kids who sit in the back row with their baseball caps pulled low over their eyes — imagine that two-thirds of them have just disappeared from your church.

Yes, look to the left and look to the right this Sunday. Put down your church bulletin; look at those kids and imagine that two-thirds of them aren't even there. Why?

Because they are *already gone*.

It's time to wake up and see the tidal wave washing away the foundation of your church. The numbers are in — and they don't look good. From across Christendom the reports are the same: *A mass exodus is underway. Most youth of today will not be coming to church tomorrow.* Nationwide polls and denominational reports are showing that the next generation is calling it quits on the traditional church. And it's not just happening on the nominal fringe; it's happening at the core of the faith.

Is that just a grim prediction? Is that just the latest arm-twisting from reactionary conservatives who are trying to instill fear into the parents and the teachers of the next generation? No, it's not just a prediction. It's a reality — as we will document clearly from commissioned professional and statistically valid research later in this book. In fact, it's already happening . . . just like it did in England; it's happening here in North America. *Now*. Like the black plagues that nearly wiped out the general population of Europe, a spiritual black plague has almost killed the next generation of European believers. A few churches are surviving. Even fewer are thriving. The vast majority are slowly dying. It's a spiritual epidemic, *really*. A wave of spiritual decay and death has almost entirely stripped a continent of its godly heritage, and now the same disease is infecting North America.

Many of us saw it coming but didn't want to admit it. After all, our churches looked healthy on the surface. We saw bubbling Sunday schools and dynamic youth ministries. As parents and grandparents we appreciatively graced the doors of the church, faithfully dragging our kids with us, as our ages pushed into the 40s and 50s and beyond. But a vacuum was forming: there were the college students who no

longer showed up for the Sunday worship service, the newly married couple that never came back after the honeymoon. . . . Sure, there were exceptions and we were grateful for their dedication. For the most part, however, we saw that the 20- and 30-somethings from our congregations were increasingly AWOL. To be honest, none of us really wanted to admit it, did we? And so we began to justify to ourselves that maybe it wasn't happening at all.

Recent and irrefutable statistics are forcing us to face the truth. Respected pollster George Barna was one of the first to put numbers to the epidemic. Based on interviews with 22,000 adults and over 2,000 teenagers in 25 separate surveys, Barna unquestionably quantified the seriousness of the situation: *six out of ten 20-somethings who were involved in a church during their teen years are already gone.*¹ Despite strong levels of spiritual activity during the teen years, most 20-somethings disengage from active participation in the Christian faith during their young adult years — and often beyond that. Consider these findings:

- Nearly 50% of teens in the United States regularly attend church-related services or activities.
- More than three-quarters talk about their faith with their friends.
- Three out of five teens attend at least one youth group meeting at a church during a typical three-month period.
- One-third of teenagers participate in Christian clubs at school.²

That's all well and good, but do these numbers stand the test of time? Is the involvement of church-ed children and teens continuing into young adulthood? Unfortunately not. Not even close. The Barna

1. Barna Research Online, "Teenagers Embrace Religion but Are Not Excited About Christianity," January 10, 2000, www.Barna.org.

2. http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D165951%2526M%253D201117,00.html.

research is showing that religious activity in the teen years does not translate into spiritual commitment as individuals move into their 20s and 30s (and our own research, you are about to discover, will illuminate you with reasons as to why this occurs).

Most of them are pulling *away* from church, are spending *less* time alone studying their Bibles, are giving *very little* financially to Christian causes, are *ceasing* to volunteer for church activities, and are *turning their backs* on Christian media such as magazines, radio, and television. What does this look like numerically for today's 20-somethings?

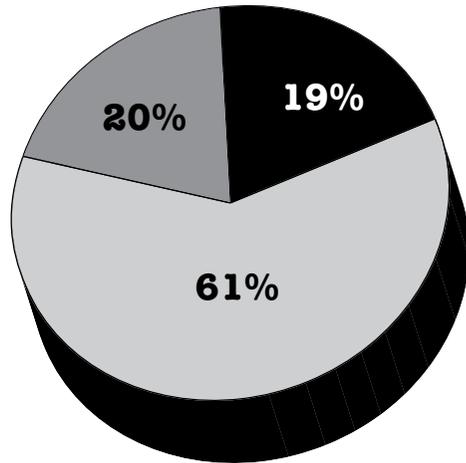
- 61% of today's young adults who were regular church attendees are now "spiritually disengaged." They are not actively attending church, praying, or reading their Bibles.
- 20% of those who were spiritually active during high school are maintaining a similar level of commitment.
- 19% of teens were never reached by the Christian community, and they are still disconnected from the Church or any other Christian activities.

Shortly after Barna blew the whistle on the problem, individual denominations and churches began to take an honest look at what was happening as their children and teens began disappearing into the young adult years. Their findings confirmed the trends that Barna had found. Dozens of groups have looked at the issue from slightly different angles. Each study yields slightly different results, but their conclusions are unanimously startling. For example, when the Southern Baptist Convention researched the problem, they discovered that *more* than two-thirds of young adults who attended a Protestant church for at least a year in high school stopped attending for *at least* a year between the ages of 18 and 22.³

3. http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D165951%2526M%253D201117,00.html.

Twenty somethings struggle to stay active in Christian faith.

- 20% churched as teen,
spiritually active at
age 29
- 61% churched as teen,
disengaged during
twenties
- 19% never churched
as teen, still
unconnected



Source: The Barna Group, LTD 2006

There are exceptions, of course. Here and there we find a smattering of churches with vibrant participation from the 20-something age group. In some cities, we are seeing congregations develop that are made up almost exclusively of people from this age group. But unfortunately, these are the exceptions and not the rule. The trends that we are seeing can no longer be ignored. The epidemic is a reality. The abandoned church buildings of Europe are really just buildings, yet they are graphic symbols — warnings to those of us who are seeing the same trends in our local congregations: *we are one generation away from the evaporation of church as we know it*. Slowly but certainly the church of the future is headed toward the morgue and will continue to do so — unless we come to better understand what is happening and implement a clear, biblical plan to circumvent it.

The trends are known; more and more are finding out about them — but the vital question concerns what is the root problem of why this is happening. We need to know why if we are going to formulate possible solutions.

Who, Why, and What?

I began traveling and speaking in the United States in the 1980s. As an Australian, it didn't take long before I felt I had a good feeling for the pulse of American Christianity . . . and I saw some tremendous needs. At the time, America could rightly be labeled the greatest Christian nation on earth, the center of the economic world — and although the Church was equipped with nearly every conceivable tool and luxury for developing and expressing its faith — I could see that the Church was in great need.

Since moving to the United States in 1987, I have spoken in hundreds of different churches from many denominations, numerous Bible colleges, seminaries, and Christian conferences on American soil. I have talked with the pastors; I've listened to those in the congregations; I have experienced “worship” in almost every conceivable style and form. The ministry of Answers in Genesis is deeply committed to the American church. In fact, the faltering health of the Church in the greatest Christian nation on earth is what motivated my wife and me to move our family to this country in the first place. My wife and I testify that God called us as missionaries to America — particularly the American Church — to call it back to the authority of the Word of God beginning in Genesis.

The Bible calls the Church “the Body of Christ.” Today, over 20 years after our move, the statistics prove that His body is bleeding profusely. The next generation of believers is draining from the churches, and it causes me great personal and professional concern. I've sat in the grand, but vacant, churches of Europe. I know where this is headed. Where Europe is today spiritually, America will be tomorrow — and for the same reasons, if the Church does not recognize where the foundational problem lies and address it.

When I began to seriously ponder Barna's numbers, naturally I wanted to find out more. For help, I called on a trusted and respected supporter of Answers in Genesis. As the chairman of America's Research Group, and as a leading marketing research and business analyst expert, Britt Beemer specializes in studying human behavior. Over

the decades he has conducted dozens and dozens of surveys for leading corporations as well as small businesses. He analyzes the marketplace and the clientele, and makes recommendations that keep the companies excelling in a competitive world. When we were considering building the Creation Museum, we asked Britt if we could reasonably dream of 250,000 people visiting each year. Britt did his research and predicted that 400,000 people would visit the museum in the first year! He was wrong by two days. (The 400,000th visitor entered the museum 363 days after we opened.) Needless to say, when we had questions about the epidemic of people leaving church, we turned to him for answers.

Our goal was simple: We wanted to know *who* was leaving, *why* they were leaving, and *what* (if anything) could be done about it. To that end, Britt and his America's Research Group initiated a qualified study with probing questions to get powerful insight into the epidemic the Church is facing. To get to the core of the issues, his team studied *only* those whom we are most concerned about: every person in our sample said *they attended church every week or nearly every week when they were growing up, but never or seldom go today.*

We selected those between 20 and 30 who once attended conservative and “evangelical” churches. We wanted to look at the churches that claim to be Bible-believing congregations with Bible-preaching pastors. According to Barna, about 6 percent of people in their 20s and 30s can be considered “evangelical.” This is about the same as the number of teenagers (5 percent).⁴ The results from Britt's research would undoubtedly have been more drastic if we had considered more liberal congregations. We deliberately skewed the research toward conservatives so that we could all understand that whatever problems showed up would be much worse for the church population in general.

After 20,000 phone calls, with all the raw data in hand, Britt began to analyze the numbers. The things he discovered— as well as the things he *didn't* discover — began to shed light (in a quite astonishing way) on this monumental problem facing the future of Christianity.

4. www.barna.org.



The sample included:

1,000
individuals from
coast to coast

balanced
according to
population
and gender

with just over
half being aged
25–29

with under
half being aged
20–24

First of all, he *didn't* discover anything abnormal about the group as a whole. There weren't an unusual number of homeschoolers, or secular school kids, who were leaving. There wasn't a significant number of females compared to males that had decided to leave. In other words, the 60 percent plus of the evangelical kids who choose to leave the church look pretty much like the 40 percent who decide to

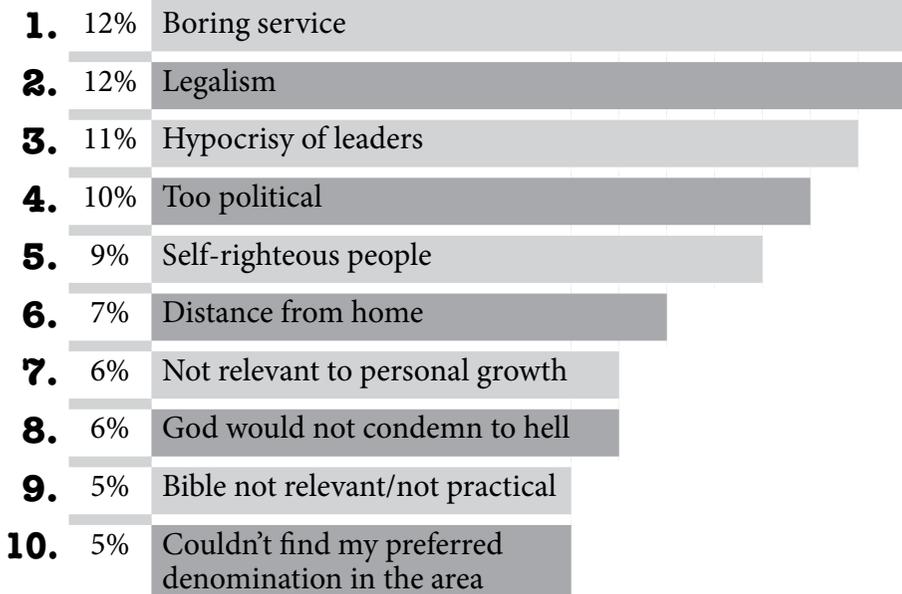
stay — at least on the outside. The breakdown of those who left really fits the profile of the evangelical population in general.

So at first, the *who* question didn't seem to give us many answers. So then, *why*? Why did they leave the church? When we asked them this open-ended question, we got an earful.

At first, we were surprised (and a little disappointed) that there wasn't a single reason. It would have been nice to find a single identifiable virus somewhere. How simple it would have been to stereotype the whole group and point out one germ that had been causing the sickness to spread. But the numbers didn't say that. *A single identifiable culprit didn't appear.*

Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. When LifeWay did their research for the Southern Baptist Convention, 97 percent of the “dropouts” listed one or more specific life-change issues as a reason they left church. The most frequent reason they gave for leaving church was almost an indifferent shrug of the shoulders: “I

The top 10 reasons were:



simply wanted a break from church” (27 percent). The transition into college and adulthood also affected many: “I moved to college and stopped attending church” (25 percent), and “work responsibilities prevented me from attending” (23 percent). Others simply “moved too far away from the church to continue attending” (22 percent).⁵ In all honesty, these kinds of results just seemed too shallow for us at Answers in Genesis. And they seemed too superficial to Britt as well. We have a massive epidemic on our hands, and researchers seemed to be content with answers that sounded like “I just didn’t feel very good,” or “I wasn’t there because I chose to be someplace else.” Too many researchers accept simple, superficial answers. They acknowledge that there is a massive shift taking place in the spiritual lives of young adults, but when it comes to really figuring out what’s going on, they kind of throw up their hands and sigh, “I guess that’s just the way it is!”

End of story? Not hardly. This is precisely why we teamed up with an expert like Britt Beemer who probes, and probes, and probes until he finds the right reasons. We found the real reasons, though some of them will shake many churches to their very core.

Never content with the easy answers that people give to justify their behavior, Britt is an expert in consumer behavior who taps into their minds as he finds out what people really believe in order to reveal what is driving their behavior. Until Answers in Genesis commissioned this study, never before had this type of research been conducted — and our research was formulated to not just deeply probe what people believe but answer the questions in regard to WHY people believe what they do. We can now identify the real answers as well as the causes affecting young people who leave the church.

As Britt studied his data, it was obvious that multiple issues are behind the exodus from church. The *why?* question would prove to be more complicated than many expected. But soon, as the numbers became more clear, patterns emerged, assumptions were destroyed,

5. http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D165951%2526M%253D201117,00.html.

and quirky findings surfaced. One of the most important and startling findings turned out not to answer the *why?* question, but rather the *when?* question.

Of all the 20 to 29-year-old evangelicals who attended church regularly but no longer do so:



95% of them attended church regularly during their elementary and middle school years



55% attended church regularly during high school



11% were still going to church during college

I think this is one of the most revealing and yet challenging statistics in the entire survey — and something we didn't expect. Most people assume that students are lost in college. We've always been trying to prepare our kids for college (and I still think that's a critical thing to do, of course), but it turns out that only 11 percent of those who have left the Church did so during the college years. Almost 90 percent of them were lost in middle school and high school. By the time they got to college they were already gone! About 40 percent are leaving the Church during elementary and middle school years! Most people assumed that elementary and middle school is a fairly neutral environment where children toe the line and follow in the footsteps of their parents' spirituality. Not so. I believe that over half of these kids were lost before we got them into high school! Whatever diseases are fueling the epidemic of losing our young people, they are infecting our students much, much earlier than most assumed. Let me say this again:

We are losing many more people by middle school and many more by high school than we will ever lose in college.

Many parents will fork out big bucks to send these students to Christian colleges, hoping to protect them in their faith. But the fact is, they're already gone. They were lost while still in the fold. They were disengaging while they were still sitting in the pews. They were preparing their exit while they were faithfully attending youth groups and Sunday schools.

What a reminder to parents (and Christian leaders) to do exactly what God's Word instructs us to do — to “train up a child in the way he should go . . .” (Prov. 22:6). And further, “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:6–7; NKJV). What a reminder to teach children from when they are born — and a reminder to be diligent in providing the right sort of training/curricula, etc., for children.

Sadly, I think many see children's programs as entertainment, teaching Bible stories, and so on, but when they get older we need to think about preparing them somehow for college — but as our research showed, by then they are already gone! For most, it was basically too late!

This topic regarding when we begin to lose our kids is where the study began to get very interesting and very illuminating. For example:

Those who no longer believe that all of the accounts and stories in the Bible are true:

