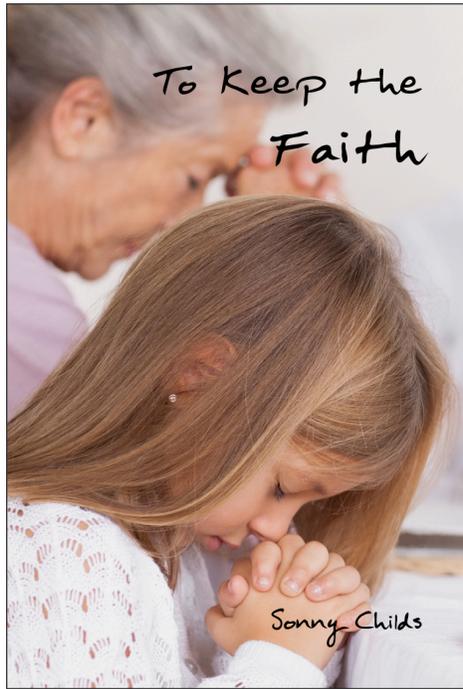


To Keep the Faith

By Sonny Childs



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Introduction

Some church growth studies estimate that as high as 70% of high school seniors leave the church upon graduation!

When I began working with young people over 30 years ago, church growth experts estimated that approximately 45% of high school seniors left the church upon graduation. That statistic shocked me then and the tragic numbers continue to drive my ministry to this day.

Over the last 3 decades, I have given a great deal of thought and prayer to this subject. I have been blessed to travel from coast to coast, speaking on this tragic trend, as well as write several books about the biblical solutions. The following information is a brief overview of the highlights from that material.





Contents

In order to reverse the tragic trend of young people abandoning the faith, four areas must be addressed:

1. **Conversion** - Understanding Sin, Sacrifice, and Self-discipline
2. **Investment** - Taking Ownership of Their Place Within the Church
3. **Dependence** - Developing Loyalty to the Spiritual Network
4. **Expression** - Celebrating Reverent, Relevant, Revealing Worship

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1. Conversion

2. Investment
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Understanding Sin, Sacrifice, and Self-discipline

Everyone likes to talk about the “let it go!” side of grace, but without the “let Him in!” experience of conversion, true change does not occur.

One of my greatest fears for this American culture is the overwhelming temptation to embrace liberal agendas of entitlements. We award free food to those who are overweight and we hand out free money to those who refuse to get a job. We legalize illegal aliens so they can do our work for us. We import more than we export. We idolize the sordid lives of Hollywood stars and we buy big screen TVs to expose our children to their divorce-ridden, drug-induced, morally-depraved lives of spoiled materialism. Americans have grown lazy. We are obese and we are undisciplined. Effort has become our enemy and convenience has become our god.

Unfortunately, the same attitude of casual convenience has found its way into the Christian movement. Consider just one example - the process of conversion.

Many have so dismissed the authority of God’s instructions that they have reduced the salvation experience to a simple thought process. Followers are encouraged to focus on their sin, recite a pre-scripted prayer, hear the pastor pronounce them saved, then exit the drive-through convinced of their salvation. I ask you, “Where is the crucifixion? Where is the death of the old man of sin? Where is the gut-wrenching experience of loss, transformation, and self-sacrifice?”

Thomas Paine once wrote, “What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly....” Is it possible that this is the reason for the decline of Christianity in America? Is it possible that this is the reason our children demonstrate little loyalty to the Bride of Christ or commitment to the values of the One they call “Savior”? Our level of appreciation is directly related to our level of investment. When the conversion process is reduced to a simple mental exercise, appreciation, loyalty, and responsible Christian living suffers.

The inspired brother of Jesus put it this way, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” (James 2:26, NKJV) A dead conversion is a half experienced conversion. Both the inner man and the outer man must be united in the process in order for the whole man to be converted.

The Holy Spirit describes conversion as a death, a burial, and a rebirth; three of the most traumatic moments in the human experience. Coming to Christ includes many things, but convenience is not one of them!

Notice the following passage. Please give special attention to the vivid illustration and dramatic description the Spirit assigns to the salvation process.

Romans 6:3-4 (NKJV)

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Death is final. It is marked by a specific time and place. Death is traumatic. It is marked by specific loss and separation. In order for baptism to be the death described in Romans 6:3-4, it must be more than a casual church initiation service. The Holy Spirit says that baptism marks the moment of death as well as the beginning of new life. Baptism is a salvation marker! Anything less is too casual to be a full recognition of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

So what can we conclude from all of this? Do we save ourselves through baptism? Absolutely not! Does God save us through our free-will choice to join with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection? Absolutely! God does the saving when we join Christ in the sacrifice. Notice again the words of our passage, “buried WITH Him through baptism into death”. Coming to Christ is anything but convenient. It hurts. It involves loss, humiliation, and surrender. Conversion is born of crisis. Conversion is a crucifixion.

Conclusion

The entry point of grace is nothing less than traumatic. In order for young people to experience true conversion, and thereby make a lasting investment in the church, they must first count the cost. They must be taught the price of sin, the pain of sacrifice, and the necessity of self-discipline.

Please notice the expressions of spiritual trauma used to describe converts on the very first day of the church. This description of conversion must be duplicated in the lives of our young people if they are to remain loyal to the Bride of Christ.

According to the biblical record, the entry point of grace involves:

Difficult discoveries - “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:36, NKJV)

Gut-wrenching guilt - “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart...” (Acts 2:37, NKJV)

Response of desperation - “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37, NKJV)

Life-changing sacrifice - “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized...” (Acts 2:38, NKJV)

Submission to a new Master - “...baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...” (Acts 2:38, NKJV)

Acceptable terms of surrender - “...for the remission of sins.” (Acts 2:38, NKJV)

The entry point of grace requires nothing less than a death to self (Romans 6:3-4) and an emergency surgery at the very hands of Jesus (Colossians 2:11-12). The entry point of grace involves trauma to the

spiritual man. Just as a person who is experiencing physical loss must take time to grieve, a person experiencing radical spiritual transformation must take time to acknowledge the trauma. Without the biblical steps mentioned above, partial converts walk around in a self-delusional haze of spiritual denial. In order for the church to be an effective support group for spiritual recovery, we must start at the beginning.

When the entry point of grace is reduced to a convenient absolution of conscience through the recitation of a pre-scripted “sinner’s prayer,” the cross is reduced to verbal jewelry and the Divine torture of Calvary becomes little more than religious history. When the entry point of grace becomes an after-the-fact ceremony of symbolic gestures (“outward sign of an inward grace”), the celebration overwhelms the journey and the “let it go!” rushes past the “let Him in!”

The young need more than a convenient Lord and a casual Savior. They need to learn the truth about the glory *and the sacrifice* of true conversion, the metamorphosis of grace.

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1. Conversion
- 2. Investment**
3. Dependence
4. Expression

Taking Ownership of Their Place Within the Church

The second area that must be developed in order for our children to keep the faith is investment. They must take ownership of their place within the body of Christ. To do this, adults must learn to be effective mentors.

Years ago I wrote the following poem to illustrate the journey a mentor and student must take in order to experience a partnership in investment.

To Be a Great Mentor

**A mentor can do many things,
To show the worth his vision brings.
With eloquence he can explain,
In speech or song with sweet refrain.**

**But often words cannot embrace,
The vision he's seen face to face.
He needs a way to show them more,
He wants to make their spirit soar.**

**When mentors want their vision caught,
Sometimes the best way it is taught
Is not with props or fancy talk,
But invitation for a walk.**

**They reach the place to see the view,
The teacher takes position new.
The two now stand there side by side,
The leader is no longer guide.**

**With open hand he points ahead,
To lessons that are best unsaid.
As mentor he's thought very wise,
'Cause students see with open eyes.**

In order for young people to make a lasting investment in the church, they must find a functional place within the body. Below is a quick study of Romans 15:1-6 followed by a study of several expressions of worship. After each biblical example, there are questions to help young people identify their functionality within that area. Be the teacher described in the poem above. Take young people to these passages and let them discover their own function and, thereby, make an investment.

Romans 15:1-6 (NKJV)

We then who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. "...bear the weaknesses of the weak..." - In the Greek language, the word for bear is *bastazein*. It is the same word as is used of Christ bearing the cross. How often do you feel the pain of others and struggle under the load of their burden?

2. "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edification." - In the Greek language, the word for edification is *oikodome*. It literally means the things of building up. How effective are you at encouraging others and building them up?

3. "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning...." - In the Greek language, the word for learning is *didaskalia*. It means teaching or instruction. Fellowship is based upon learning from scripture and the application it makes in the lives of our family. How effective are you as a learner?

4. "...that we through patience ... might have hope." - In the Greek language, the word for patience is *hupomone*. This word means far more than patience. Hupomone is the victorious adequacy which can cope with life's struggles. How spiritually adequate are you? How effective do you use this inner strength to encourage others.

5. "...that we through ... comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." - In the Greek language, the word for comfort is *paraklesis*. It literally means to call beside. Consolation often comes by calling to one's side an aid or comforter. How effective are you at giving consolation?

6. "That we ... might have hope." - In the Greek language, the word for hope is *elpis*. Biblical hope is not wishful thinking or playing the odds. Biblical hope is confident expectation. Do you confidently expect the blessings of Heaven? How effectively do you use this confident expectation to encourage others?

7. "Now may the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded toward one another...." - In the Greek language, the words for like-minded are *auto phroneo*. They mean to think or be minded in a common way. Although fellowship does not demand perfect agreement, it does require harmony. There will always be differences of opinion, but those who are within the bonds of Christian fellowship have solved the problems of living together. They are confident that the unity they have in Christ is far greater than any difference that might divide them. How complete is your like-mindedness with fellow Christians?

As Romans 15:1-6 concludes, Paul points out the ultimate result of effective Christian fellowship, "...that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." The supreme goal of all Christian fellowship is unity in praise of God the Father. Involvement in the various expressions of worship is also a great enticement to investment. Guide young people to the following list. Help them

find their own function within the worship service. (Note: More information about reverent, relevant, and revealing worship will be discussed in the final section of this book.)

1. *Prayer* - In Acts 2:42 (NKJV), we are told that early Christians “continued steadfastly ... in prayers.” In I Thessalonians 5:17 (NKJV), Christians are commanded to “pray without ceasing.” How is your prayer life? Do you encourage the prayer life of others through teaching and example? How would you measure your effective use of this expression of worship?

2. *Singing* - In Ephesians 5:19 (NKJV), Paul told the early Christians to worship by “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Not every Christian can sing with a beautiful voice, but every Christian is commanded to sing. The true effectiveness of singing is not measured by pitch or rhythm but by message and sincerity. How well do you speak to your fellow Christians through song?

3. *Study* - In the early church, Bible study came in at least three forms: personal study (II Timothy 2:15), through the aid of a teacher (II Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 5:12), and through the aid of a preacher (Romans 10:14-15). How effective are you at personal study, listening to others, and sharing what you know?

In II Timothy 1:11 (NKJV), Paul said that he “was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.” In this passage, Paul differentiates between the work of a preacher and the work of a teacher. You should study this distinction further and ask yourself for which you are best suited.

4. *Communion* - Perhaps the best definition of communion is having a common union. Communion is expressed when people of common faith unite to memorialize and celebrate the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. In Acts 20:7, we find that the early church met every Sunday to take communion. In I Corinthians 11:28-29 (NKJV), every Christian was commanded to “examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” How much focus and self-examination do you give to the Lord’s supper each week? How would you measure your effective use of this expression of worship?

5. *Giving* - In I Corinthians 16:2, Paul gave this command to the church in the city of Corinth: “On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.” In keeping with that example, you should consider making weekly donations to the needy and to the work of your local congregation. Under the Old Law, ancient Hebrews were commanded to give 10% of their belongings. What percentage do you give to the Lord? How does your contribution toward God’s work compare to your weekly spending on recreation and entertainment? How would you measure your effective use of this expression of worship?

The list above is not complete. Worship can also be expressed through fellowship, service to others, personal change in character, or triumphant endurance over hardship. Worship is a positive acknowledgment of God and it should be part of every moment of every day.

Conclusion

Whether worship is expressed in a collective church gathering, as is commanded by God (Hebrews 10:24-25), or individually, as is also commanded by Him (Matthew 6:6), worship is only acceptable when it comes from hearts that are filled with awe. Teach young people to look for God in everything they do and their very life will become an ongoing worship service to Him and an investment in His people.

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1. Conversion
2. Investment
- 3. Dependence**
4. Expression

Developing Loyalty to the Spiritual Network

The third area that must be developed, in order for our children to keep the faith, is dependence upon their spiritual social network.

I vividly remember the first time this principle effected my life. As a young Christian growing up in the mountains of central Pennsylvania, the social network of our small congregation was essential to my spiritual survival. Churches within our fellowship were very few and far between. It was a common occurrence to drive many miles just to spend a couple of hours with other Christian youth.

Sundays were a highlight of every week. The youth group always sat together during worship service (second pew from the front on the left). We loved to sing and were often depended upon to carry the songs during worship.

Afterwards, the youth group spent the entire day at the building. We played games, did homework, and just hung out. We were family.

High school was especially challenging. I attended a very large public school with all the typical social pressures. Christians were bullied. Alcohol and other drugs were common and teen sex was expected. As a young athlete trying to excel at sports and still survive spiritually, my youth group was like the ultimate support group. Meeting these friends in the lunch room or at study hall was like stepping out of a dark alley and into a safe haven of family. Weekends with the youth group kept me away from the drunken sex orgies that often destroyed other members of my sports teams. My church social network was essential.

Years passed and I encountered this dynamic again.

After graduating from college, I was hired to serve as youth minister for a congregation of more than 700 members. The youth group by itself was larger than many congregations (over 100 young people).

My first challenge was learning how to effectively serve a group that size without neglecting those who needed individual attention. I soon realized there was not enough of me to spread around to all of them. That's when the power of community and positive peer pressure became evident again. Within this large youth group, God had blessed me with several mature members and I quickly learned to utilize their abilities.

It was during this challenging time that I also discovered the great longing that young people have for a spiritual support group. On Sunday nights, after the traditional services, we would gather at a member's house for a youth group prayer meeting. As we would sit in a circle, paper and pencils would be distributed. Each person was asked to write down the prayer requests made by other members of the group and to pray about them during the week.

Slowly, we worked our way around the room giving everyone a chance to speak. Many times, young people broke down and cried as they confided in the group the pain they were experiencing. Kids would rush across the room to offer their love. On many occasions, the entire process was paused in order to give young people the opportunity to offer advice and console each other. They were family.

The success of this simple activity was overwhelming. We quickly discovered that teens would often come to prayer meetings when they would not come to events planned with "fun and games." One Sunday evening, we had over sixty teens turn out for prayer, but a week later, less than half of that number turned out for a party. Young people do NOT require a constant diet of fun and games to keep them loyal. They require a family - a spiritual social network.

Today, I am the director of the Missionaries for America Program, an evangelistic training program for young people. Every summer I see this important principle play out in the lives of young people who come to us from all across the nation.

As each of the teams assemble then begin traveling, serving, and living together for weeks at a time, they learn to invest in each other. They are forced to work through personality quirks and develop group cooperation skills. They share belongings, do each other's laundry, mother each other through sickness, establish their own disciplinary peer pressures, and look out for the younger members of the team. In short, this "live together experience" forces the young people to invest in the success of their unit. They become a family.

The church needs more "live together experiences." She desperately needs to capture the unifying benefits of social networking.

For the church to keep the next generation, she must provide real-time, real-life relevance. The church must become the core of their social network.

Too often we have allowed our children to become social gluttons of the world's activities. Like limiting junk food before lunch, parents need to dial back their child's high caloric intake of the world's social events. Parents must help create within their child an appetite for social interaction with the church family.

Suggestions:

- Take church family mission trips.
- Go on campouts as a group. (A ropes course can be a powerful tool to build unity.)
- Plan men's and women's retreats.
- Establish a Big Brother/Big Sister Program with the senior saints.
- Plan regular family cookouts complete with family games. (Example: Have a tailgate party after Sunday services.)
- Support each other's events. Go to sporting events, piano recitals, award ceremonies, etc., of other church members and their children.

Conclusion

Hebrews 10:25 (NIV)

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another---and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

It has always been assumed that this verse is talking about the Christian worship assembly. Read the context before and after. Is it possible that this verse is just as much about the importance of being together socially as it is about attendance at religious services?

In this verse, encouragement and meeting together are connected. What is it about simply being together that brings encouragement? What should this tell us about the importance of a Christian's social network?

When a church family only comes together three times a week to engage in formalized, prescribed meetings, intimate bonding is unlikely to occur. Without that bonding, young people are not likely to make long-term investments in the group. Create a spiritual social network on which young people are dependent and their loyalty to the church WILL be the result.

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1. Conversion
2. Investment
3. Dependence
- 4. Expression**

Celebrating Reverent, Relevant, Revealing Worship

A word study of the term worship, in the original language, offers two primary definitions. The first and most commonly used is “to kiss toward.” This definition indicates actions taken to express affection and loyalty. But outward signs of worship are not always sincere. Jesus once said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (Matthew 15:8)

The second definition of worship is “to be in awe of.” This definition goes beyond outward expressions and identifies the very reason for those expressions. Awe is what happens when you hold your newborn child for the first time or look up at the billions of stars in the sky. Awe causes an exhale of almost disbelief when convicted by the obviously awesome nature of God. Only when a heart is so filled with admiration and affection that words seem inadequate is it truly ready for sincere expressions of worship.

Perhaps the reason young people are deserting the church in such alarming numbers is because the church is failing to encourage their awe. We offer them expressions of worship (to kiss toward) but fail to engage their hearts in expressions of worship (to be in awe of). Since worship is not simply an event, but rather an acknowledgement that is born from an attitude of humble dependence and overwhelming appreciation, the church must make it a primary objective to foster an atmosphere that promotes these expressions of "awe!"

Some time ago, I was approached by a very discouraged youth leader. He had just returned from a church event for small children. He explained that during this event the youngsters were discouraged from singing "devotional songs" that included hand motions or clapping. Some of the adults felt that these songs lacked spiritual substance and the motions were unholy. During each assembly of the little children, songs were sung out of the ancient, "traditionally correct" hymnals and a preacher lectured to them for over an hour. The discouraged youth worker went on to explain that when the children lost interest they were reprimanded. At one point, the children became so bored and so disinterested with the adults' definition of worship that, when they failed to pay attention, their favorite recreational privileges were taken away.

Sadly, this does not just happen at youth events. This tragedy occurs every week in church services all around the world and will, perhaps, even happen again this week in the service that you attend. The tragic story above illustrates far too well what we have done to our young people and to their desire for worship.

Did you know that some evangelism studies show that approximately 85% of all Christian believers come to Christ before the age of 20? Almost half of the world is under the age of 20. Surely you would agree that a farmer who spends the majority of his labors in a field that only yields 20%, and almost totally ignores a field yielding 80%, is a very foolish farmer. Yet, this is often our approach in the church.

Studies show that as high as 70% of high school seniors leave God after graduation. Did you know that the suicide rate in America has nearly quadrupled in the last 30 years? What is discouraging the young? Why do they struggle to reach spiritual commitment and find a faith that will give them hope in their darkest hours? Could it be that our worship services have ritualistically bored them to death and have convinced them that God is too high and His presence too holy for them to come close to Him?

If it is the church's responsibility to produce an atmosphere that promotes the "awe!" of God, then every Christian deserves an opportunity to reach this worshipful attitude. Worship services must reach out to all levels of spiritual maturity. My grandmother often reached the level of "awe!" by singing "The Old Rugged Cross." The devotional song, "We Shall Assemble On The Mountain," helps draw me into the

presence of God. For children, it may be "Jesus Loves Me" or "The Wise Man Built His House Upon A Rock" complete with hand motions and laughter. But, whatever the age and whomever the person, we all deserve opportunities to be drawn into the convictions of "awe!"

Ancient wording of traditional songs, repetitious orders of worship, old English jargon, monotone sermons, and a host of other man-made limits to true worship have literally murdered our children's desire to approach God. For too many of them, "Awe!" comes not as a response to God's awesome nature, but as an exhale at the end of another yawn.

At nearly every speaking engagement, I am approached by a mother who is in tears over her child's decision to leave the church. Some day we will answer for those we have pushed away. Like a bad steward who ignores a field yielding over 80%, God will require an answer for our mismanagement.

Many have wrongly concluded that the only way to remedy this situation is to make the worship service into a circus. This author challenges that conclusion. I suggest that our young people are not asking for a circus, they are simply looking for conviction.

Young people *are* interested in spiritual things. They do want to worship. But young people want to do more than just go through the motions. They want to see and experience life-changing worship.

Too often, young people watch adults go through the motions without emotion and they ask themselves, "Why should I?"

For a moment, allow me to be very personal. When was the last time you cried during communion or said "Amen!" after the final verse of "How Great Thou Art"? When was the last time you responded to the invitation and cried publicly about your sin? Conviction is not an option, it is a necessary condition of the heart that leads us into the presence of God.

Our young people see too many grandfathers who do not sing during the song service or grandmothers who write their contribution checks while the grape juice is being passed. Too many fathers take time off from work to go on vacation, but refuse to take time off from work to go to church. Too many mothers are more concerned about their child's homework than they are about their child's assignments from Sunday school. Do you roast the preacher and grill the elders over Sunday lunch? Is church work your passion or something you endure? The young people are watching. They expect more than just empty words and heartless expressions. Before they give their lives to Jesus, they want to know how He has changed your life. Does it show? Are you convicted?

Someone asked, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Although this is a very probing question, perhaps a better question would be, "Since you ARE on trial for being a Christian, is there enough evidence to convict your children?"



Conclusion

There is no denying the emergency. Just look around you. The statistical nightmare is obvious. We are losing our kids.

Change must come immediately! But, that said, it is unrealistic to expect results willz come at the same pace. There is no quick fix. It has taken us many years and multiple generations to arrive at such an emergency. It may require the same to get us out. Patience, perseverance and persistence are essential.

It is possible that an entirely new generation of parents and church leaders will need to be trained before hopeful numbers can again be realized. The question is, when will we start this training and who will we use to train them? Answer: A revival among parents and church leaders is our only hope. We must lead if we expect our young people to keep the faith.