

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”—TOP 5 ARTICLE OF 2021

How to ‘Disciple’ Your Kids into Church Dropout Status

by Jared C. Wilson

A recent LifeWay study confirms the church dropout rate for young adults continues to hover around 70 percent. “The good news for Christian leaders is that churches don’t seem to be losing more students than they were 10 years ago. However, the difference in the dropout rate now and then is not large enough statistically to say it has actually improved,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

While the dropout rate stays roughly the same (actually down 4 percent), the outlook on dropouts returning is actually looking worse. There are definitely some things we can do to work against this distressing trend, and I offered some brief thoughts on “youth group culture” in a recent Twitter thread. But most are agreed—the epicenter of influence on kids to or away from church is in the Christian home. So, working backward, what are some ways religious families may be reinforcing the dropout trend, despite their own hopes? Here are six:

1. Attend church sporadically.

If you treat church like an option, your children will too. If going to church is contingent only on nothing else going on, if sports or hobbies or vacations frequently take priority over gathering with God’s people, how could this not over time imprint itself upon your kids?

2. Complain about your church.

This is something, when I was pastoring, that my wife and I took rather seriously. We were extremely careful not to complain about problems at church, or even discuss disappointments or circumstantial discouragements, in front of our kids. We didn’t want them to come to see church as a place that discourages mom and dad. We didn’t want them to nurse any grievances against even the idea of church because of our thoughtless exposure of our hurts about it to them. As they got older, we shared more and more openly with them and in front of them. But if your kids are constant witness, even at a young age, to your complaints, disappointments, disgruntlements, conflicts, or even gossip related to the church, you nurse their gradual disillusionment.

3. Insulate them from the rest of the body.

I’m convinced this is one of the biggest reasons kids raised in church drop out of church. Their experience of the church is limited wholly or mostly to youth group culture. Everything revolves around their interests or even entertainment. They are not integrated into the body. They do not engage with the intergenerational beauty of the whole church.

I’m not against student ministry per se—I do think kids benefit from age-specific teaching and being among peers who are pursuing Jesus unlike so many of their peers at school or elsewhere—but when our kids’ sole experience of church is youth-centered, they are not won to the church but to youth group. We keep trying new ways to offset this phenomenon—college and young adult ministries that serve as a kind of “13th grade” and thus only forestall the inevitable, the in-creep of youth group culture into Sunday morning gatherings that are increasingly idolatrous of the young and beset with gimmicks and pop culture silliness. But it doesn’t work. And when kids grow up and leave home, they discover “big church” and churches in other places cannot compete or do not cater to their juvenile tastes. If you baptize students, remember you are baptizing them into the body, into church membership. If we don’t treat them accordingly, they may see that Christianity is about one’s individual experience and not covenant community, and they might lose interest in that experience when it seems they’ve outgrown it.

4. Ignore their crucial questions.

Youth groups that focus on just more of the moralistic therapeutic deism as adults get in “big church.” Sermons that only reinforce evangelical stereotypes of outsiders or allow no space for lament or suffering. An equation of evangelicalism with political idolatry. Parents and leaders who do not equip students with apologetics or direct answers to cultural questions teens are asking about gender, sexuality, race, and the like. All of these common phenomena implicitly tell students that church is not a place where they can get answers for real life. If we are not helping students shore up their faith with answers to questions they will eventually face at college or beyond, we should not be surprised when they decide church has no vital place in their lives. We should not be surprised in fact when they decide Christianity doesn’t have the intellectual or cultural gravitas they need in the real world.

5. Church hop.

The consumeristic ethos runs strong in American culture especially. One thing I learned during my research for my book *The Prodigal Church* was that the average family remains in an attractional church about four to seven years before moving on. This is often due to season-of-life changes. There are obviously good reasons to leave a church. But families that hop from church to church as kids grow or tastes change or disappointments accumulate train their kids to treat church not like a family one commits to through thick and thin but like a consumeristic product one can always throw away for a perceived upgrade. And this is just one step away from deciding church in general isn’t useful.

6. Marginalize or muzzle the gospel.

In 2010, the True Love Waits campaign analyzed the results of years of their campaign to encourage sexual purity among Christian teenagers. They were shocked. The campaign that largely focused on the risks of pregnancy and disease, and the biblical prohibitions of sex outside of marriage, had virtually no effect on even churchgoing kids who had explicitly pledged to remain virgins until marriage. Co-founder Richard Ross reflected in a *Christianity Today* article about the findings: “The promise is kept most tenaciously by teenagers who have moved beyond moralistic therapeutic deism and who adore the King of Kings with awe and intimacy.”

“For teenagers who know Christ,” Ross continued, “that is a far stronger motivator than a desire to avoid disease and pregnancy. Risk avoidance is a weak motivator during adolescence. . . . Teenagers need to know about the risks of promiscuity, as well as about the benefits that total life purity brings. But the most powerful way to impact prom-night decisions is for parents, leaders, and peers to more fully awaken teenagers to God’s Son.” The law is good and must be preached. But the law cannot do what only the gospel can.

The church is the family made by Christ’s gospel. He has broken down the division between us with his blood and united us to each other by uniting us to himself by our faith. When you push the gospel to the periphery of your own religious interests and your own consideration of the church, it has the effect of disconnecting students from the only power we have to win them to Christ’s body. If, for instance, church is a regular Sunday for you but not a gospel-driven priority of your daily life—in prayer, in fellowship, in service—you show your kids that church is simply a place to go, not a people with whom you belong. And if you raise them under the shadow of the law rather than the light of Christ, you make engagement in church look like a means of earning credit with God or meriting his favor or looking religious or “spiritual,” all of which is a recipe for burnout and maybe even spiritual depression. Center on the gospel in your daily life and pray your kids flourish under grace.

If you’re interested in ensuring your kids become part of the dropout stats, any or all of these six practices are a great means of “discipleship.”