

WHEN THEY TURN AWAY

DRAWING YOUR ADULT CHILD
BACK *to* CHRIST

Rob Rienow

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*When They Turn Away: Drawing Your Adult Child
Back to Christ*

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To my father,

Bill Rienow,

who taught me that

it is never too late

to turn to God.

I am eager to

see you in heaven.

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PREFACE

“I HAVE NO GREATER joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

You are reading this book because you know that the opposite is also true. There is no greater sorrow for Christian parents than to know our children are not faithfully following Christ.

We desperately want our children to have deep faith and a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We want our families to have warm, close fellowship together throughout our lives. Most of all, we want to arrive safely home in heaven together with our children.

For many parents these seem like dreams that need to be abandoned. But there is hope, because God is still on His throne.

Before we begin, though, I need to address an elephant in the room. I do not have adult children yet. Amy and I have been blessed with six children ranging in age from one to thirteen years. So what am I doing writing a book about parenting adult children?

There are two reasons. First, I spent a decade of my pastoral life as a youth minister, working specifically with high school students and their families. I led a large youth ministry that had more than 350 active students involved each year. God did wonderful things in the lives of these young people. I’m thankful that my relationships with many of these students did not end after they left high school. I’ve lost track of the number of weddings I’ve performed for students who grew up in the youth group, and now many of them have children of their own.

It gives me great sorrow, however, that the majority of the students who seemed to be on track spiritually as juniors and seniors in high school are now no longer walking with the Lord. I used to believe that if a young person was following God faithfully at age eighteen, the spiritual cement had hardened and they were on track to follow God for a lifetime. I no longer believe that.

Show me young men and women following God at age twenty-five, however, and we find a much clearer picture as to how true and deep their faith is. So it naturally followed that ministering to high school students progressed into ministry for “twenty-somethings.” I was then in the position of trying to encourage faith in young adults who had grown up in the church, but who were in the far country, like the prodigal son. I was also deeply engaged with the parents of these young adults, and they were brokenhearted that their children had turned away from God and from the church.

My second reason for this book is that, a few years ago, God led Amy and me to begin a ministry called Visionary Parenting. It was birthed out of a time of deep repentance and brokenness, as I needed to confess that I was not putting my wife and children first in my life. I was not the spiritual leader of my home, and was doing nothing in an intentional way to pass on my faith to my own children. But the Lord changed my heart, my life, and our family.

When I began making presentations to parents at Visionary Parenting conferences, a clear pattern emerged. After I finished speaking, time after time, men and women would come up to me saying something like, “Rob, we really appreciated what you said . . . but our daughter is twenty-four. All the things you talked about apply to parents with children still in the home,” or “Our child is an adult . . . and he’s far from God.” These parents often asked through tears, “What do we do now?”

This cry was coming from all directions. God was filling my life not only with young adults who were struggling with faith, but with their parents as well. I knew my personal opinions weren’t going to offer the right direction, and pat answers were

useless. The Lord made it clear to me that I needed to search the Scriptures so I could answer the question, “What do we do now?”

My prayer is that God will use the words of this book to point you to the words in His Book. He has not left us alone to figure out for ourselves how to help our wayward children. God has given parents specific guidance and direction so that we might encourage faith in the hearts of our children—no matter how old they are.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I GIVE ALL THANKS to God who has forgiven my sin and saved me through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Next to salvation, the greatest gift God has given to me is my wife, Amy, and our six children. Amy, you have helped me in every way toward becoming the man God wants me to be.

Thanks to my mother, who raised me to know the Lord and love Him, and to my stepfather, Jack, who loves God and my mom. Both of you have put in countless hours of editorial work to make this book possible.

I'm grateful for the members of the Epaphroditus Adult Class at Wheaton Bible Church who encouraged me to pursue this project. Many of you know how much it hurts to have grown children far from God. Thank you for sharing your hearts and stories with me.

Thanks to all those who gave permission for me to share their stories in the pages ahead. Your names have been changed to protect your identity.

The Kregel team has been terrific. You've helped make the ministry of this book stronger every step of the way.

Last but not least, I'm grateful for my father, who is home in heaven with Jesus. He taught me that it's never too late to turn to God.

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

I FIRST MET MIKE when he was a high school student. He participated in our youth group's annual hiking trip on the Appalachian Trail. When you're hiking, there isn't much to do besides talk, and God provided me with an opportunity to share with him the message of the gospel. By God's grace, in the middle of the wilderness, Mike responded and put his faith and trust in Jesus. He came back and became very involved in the life of our church. He rose to be a leader in the youth group and after graduating came back and worked to mentor the younger students. I longed to see more young men like this one.

Fast-forward eight years. Mike had moved away to another part of the country. I was in my office and the phone rang. "Hi, Rob! It's Mike. Do you remember me? I'm engaged, am moving back to the area, and would like you to do our premarital counseling." I was thrilled to hear the news, and immediately arranged a time to reconnect with Mike and meet his fiancée.

Within the first few minutes of our meeting, it became apparent to me that Mike's fiancée was not a Christian. I began to gently probe into that issue by sharing with them how unity is at the core of a healthy marriage—two people becoming one—and I sensed that they might be in different places when it came to matters of faith and spirituality. It was an awkward but necessary conversation. My gentle approach didn't seem to be working, so I

turned up the volume and asked, “What happens if God blesses you with children? What would be your plan for their spiritual training?” At this point, Mike looked at me and said, “I guess we’re going to let our kids figure that stuff out on their own. There are a lot of different ways to God. I don’t think Jesus is the only way, and I don’t think that the Bible is the only holy book.”

I was stunned! I’d assumed that Mike was an active follower of Jesus Christ, and that he was about to marry someone who was not a believer. The truth was that Mike and his fiancée were in the same place spiritually. They were both completely adrift. I’m in no place to judge Mike’s salvation, but he’d come to the point in his life where there were few if any outward signs of his Christian faith. For me, the realization was deeply disturbing.

At age eighteen, Jenny was a shining star. She had a sterling reputation in her school for being a young woman of character. At our church, she was viewed as a model for younger girls to emulate. She demonstrated a passion for serving others and spent time leading small-group Bible studies. If you had asked me, “Has Jenny been evangelized and discipled?” I would have answered with a resounding, “Yes!” I would have put a check mark next to her name as someone who has clearly and firmly set the course of her life toward following Jesus.

After graduating from high school, Jenny went to a secular college in Washington, DC. When she was a junior in college, she happened to come home on a weekend when I was preaching. That Sunday afternoon, she sent an e-mail to me expressing serious concerns about the content of my sermon. Her fundamental disagreement was that I kept referring to the Bible as “the Word of God.” She said that it was offensive to her when I kept using this phrase, as if the Scriptures were the only means of authoritative truth that we had. Again, I was stunned. After further interaction with her, I realized that in three short years she had gone from passionately following Christ to the point where she no longer believed that the Bible was the unique and authoritative Word of God.

Steven was the grandson of career missionaries to Southeast Asia. Not only were his grandparents missionaries, but his great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents were as well. He had a marvelous and rich spiritual heritage. Steven, however, was not a Christian. He didn't consider himself a religious person at all. When he was growing up, his family never, in fact, went to church. How could this happen? The answer is both simple and tragic.

Steven's mother, the daughter of the third-generation missionaries, rejected her parents' faith. She then raised her children in a nonreligious home. Three generations of men and women had a radical Christian commitment on the mission field, and yet just two short generations later all signs of Christian faith had vanished.

THE CURRENT FAITH-CRISIS

Stories like these are replicating themselves millions of times over in our culture. George Barna's research from 2006 indicates that 80 percent of young adults in their twenties are disconnected from church. Three out of four of these young people *were* connected in church as teenagers but drifted away. Barna surveyed not only church connections for young adults, but also their faith convictions. He set out to discover what percentage of adults in their twenties and thirties expressed a strong commitment to faith in Christ and belief in the Bible. He wanted to determine specifically how many people

Eighty percent of young adults are disconnected from church.

- have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ;
- view their commitment to Christ as very important in their lives today;
- believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior;
- believe that God wants them to share their faith;
- believe that Satan exists;

- believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
- believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth;
- assert that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches;
- describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator who is actively involved in all things.

Take a moment and reread the list above. Does that list describe you? Barna found these basic benchmarks of biblical Christianity in only 6 percent of young adults in their twenties and thirties.¹

Researcher Thom Rainer, from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, affirms this heartbreaking reality. He led a study to determine what percentage of Americans claimed to be Christians based upon having put their faith in Christ. In other words, what percentage of Americans identify themselves as Christians and understand that being a Christian means putting one's faith in Christ alone for salvation? Here's what he found. Among Americans born before 1946, 65 percent identified themselves as Christians and were able to articulate the basics of the gospel. For those born between 1946 and 1964, the number dropped to 35 percent. For those born between 1965 and 1976, it fell to a scant 15 percent. Finally, among Americans born between 1974 and 1994, only 4 percent of the population identified themselves as Christians and had trusted Christ alone for salvation.²

Evangelism and discipleship are in dire crisis, and *it is a generational crisis*. We're losing more of our own children to the world than we are winning adult converts to faith in Christ. As a result, the percentage of Bible-believing Christians in the United States is in steady decline. The United States is, in fact, following in the misguided footsteps of Western Europe. The lands that birthed the Reformation are now overwhelmingly secular, with Bible-believing Christians making up just 1 percent of the population in some countries.³

How could this have happened? There are many reasons, and we need to understand the past if we hope to lead our children toward a different future. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll

explore some of the cataclysmic changes that have rocked Western culture, and how those changes have had an impact on the souls of our sons and daughters.

PHILOSOPHICAL REVOLUTION

The past century has seen a radical and destructive shift in how people think. The shift progressed with each generation, and two key words capture this thought revolution—pluralism and relativism. Pluralism, put simply, is the reality that people have many choices about what they believe. Pluralism has existed since the garden of Eden and is the consequence of living in a world with good and evil. Today, our world is filled with a *plurality* of religions and values from which to choose. Each has its attractions. There are sides. There are differences. But there is truth and there are lies. We're free to choose what we will believe, and God will hold us responsible for those choices.

Today's young people are saturated with pluralism, which has become unfortunately intertwined with relativism. The philosophy of relativism suggests that all statements of fact depend upon one's perspective. In other words, all statements of truth depend upon your point of view, and are relative in comparison to the point of view of others. If we tell someone that we believe Christianity is *true*, we frequently hear the response, "I'm glad that you've found something that works for you. Christianity is true for you, and my beliefs are true for me."

Consider the basic premise of relativism: "All statements of fact are relative." Look carefully at this declaration. There's an immediate problem—if all statements of fact are relative, then no statement of fact is absolutely true. If nothing is absolutely true, then the statement, "All statements of fact are relative," cannot be true either. That statement itself is a pronouncement of fact. Thus, the philosophy of relativism is thoroughly self-defeating. Its basic premise teaches that you cannot accept a basic premise. It is philosophically and logically dead before it even begins, and yet this lie has penetrated the hearts and minds of millions of people around the world.

If you were to dialogue with someone who embraces a relativistic view of the world, it may not be long before he or she brings up the famous parable from India about the blind men and the elephant. Maybe you've heard this one before. A group of three blind men are helping each other feel their way down a path. One of them bumps into an object that is blocking their way. An elephant is standing in middle of the path. The blind men then began to argue with one another about what stands before them. One man has his hand on the side of the elephant and explains that someone built a wall across the path. Another man reaches out and touches the tail. He argues that they're being blocked by a thicket of sticks and branches. The third blind man reaches out and touches the legs. He tries to persuade his friends that they're being blocked by a row of thick trees. Who is correct? This parable is repeated over and over again as an example of how truth depends on our perspective. Each blind man touched a part of the elephant, and from each man's perspective, his report was accurate.

I have yet to fully understand why this parable is used so frequently to defend pluralism and relativism. The moral of this story is not that truth is subjective and depends on each man's perspective. The moral is that each man was objectively wrong. The men were blocked by something in the path. It was not a wall, a thicket, or trees. It was an elephant.

Pluralism and relativism are most deadly when they come together in matters of faith. A few years ago, I met weekly with a group of high school students at a local restaurant. None of them were Christians, and it would be an understatement to say that the group was diverse. All together, they had pierced every pierceable body part, and had every shade of color in their hair. We had a great time every Friday afternoon talking about issues of faith, God, and the Bible. One day I asked them, "Who do you think God is?" A young man with wild hair said, "I think God is kind of like my granddad in Florida. He's there, but I never really see him." Another quickly chimed in, "God is an evil being who's out to punish us and make our lives a living hell."

The third took the opposite tact: “I don’t think God exists at all,” she said. What would I hear next? “I believe God is everywhere and in everything,” said another teen. “He’s the rocks. He’s the trees. The universe is God. I am God, too.” At that point there was an uncomfortable pause. Finally, another student offered his opinion in a thoughtful tone. “You know what? You’re all right. You all see God in a way that’s true for you, and it works for you.”

I expected the other students to either fall out of their seats laughing or find some way to tell this young man that his conclusion was silly. Each student said things that were totally antithetical to one another. One said that God is an evil being who wants to hurt us, another said that there is no God, and still another that *he* is God. But rather than respond with incredulity, everyone around the circle nodded their heads and said, “Yeah. You know what? You’re right. We’re all right. Each one of us sees the world from our own perspective, and we each have our own truth.”

Pluralism offers us every imaginable set of concepts and faith systems. Relativism persuades us that all concepts and systems are equally true and equally valid—all at the same time. This insidious combination has proved to be a devastating philosophical one-two punch in the hearts and minds of our sons and daughters. It’s also become a destructive institution in Western culture. The public schools that you likely attended as a child are nothing like the public schools of today. Only a few decades ago, prayer was encouraged in public schools, the Bible could be read comfortably in class, and songs were sung about Jesus the Messiah at the Christmas program. Your children, however, had a dramatically different experience, and you’d likely shudder if you knew what your grandchildren are being exposed to. Today, the curriculum is built upon the principles of pluralism, relativism, atheism, and evolution. Many wonderful Christian teachers and administrators work in our schools today, but it’s the curriculum that is shaping the hearts and minds of this generation. Today our curriculum is not neutral toward Christianity—it is diametrically opposed to it.⁴

Science curriculum is built upon the theory of atheistic evolution. To stand up in a public-school science classroom and say, “I believe that God created the world and that human beings are a unique and special creation separate from the animals,” is an invitation to ridicule. A second grader in my neighborhood was asked to tell the class who his hero was. He said, “My hero is Jesus.” The teacher immediately and sternly announced, “No one is allowed to say that name in this classroom!” The student was both scared and devastated. The teacher, of course, was wrongly applying the laws related to the first amendment of the constitution. Students are allowed to talk freely about their religion in the classroom. It is *teachers* who are restricted from proselytizing. In this case, the parents let the principal know what happened, and the teacher was corrected—but the damage was done.

In the last twenty years, even our youngest students have been pressed upon to reject God’s truth and embrace the values of this world. In 1992, Charles Colson called the nation’s attention to books that were being given to first graders around the country. *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy’s Roommate* were written to celebrate homosexual relationships and normalize homosexual parenting.⁵

Your children have grown up in a culture steeped in moral pluralism and relativism.

Today, all Americans hear these views espoused from the President of the United States. On September 28, 2009, President Obama gave his Family Day Proclamation, in which he declared, “Whether children are raised by two parents, a single parent, grandparents, a same-sex couple, or a guardian, families encourage us to do our best.”⁶ When the elected leader of our nation casts aside a fundamental moral principle, we should not be surprised at the chaos that rules our day.

DECAY IN THE CHURCH

Your children, then, have grown up in a culture steeped in moral pluralism and relativism. This philosophical revolution is now wreaking havoc even in our churches. Some Christians are

skilled at bashing the secular culture around us, but often turn a blind eye to the destructive forces at work in our churches. Many pockets of the Christian church quietly followed society on a parallel track of decay, and now the seeds that were planted are bearing fruit—the fruit of millions of our children and grandchildren far from God.

How has the church been infected by the philosophical revolution? We've largely abandoned our belief in the sufficiency of Scripture. The Protestant Reformation was built on the “five solas”:

- *Sola fide*—only faith. We are not saved by our good works, but through faith.
- *Sola gratia*—only grace. We do not deserve salvation; it is by the grace of God.
- *Solus Christus*—only Christ. Only through the work of Christ can we be saved.
- *Soli Deo Gloria*—only for the glory of God. The glory of God is the purpose of all things.
- *Sola Scriptura*—only Scripture. The Bible alone is a sufficient guide for all matters of faith and practice.

I recently had lunch with Don Cole, who has served as a pastor on Moody Radio for many years. I asked him how he would define *sola Scriptura*. He said, “In the Bible we have everything we *need* to know. God has given us everything important, about everything important. In it we find everything that matters, about everything that matters.”

Is the Bible a comprehensive guide about science? No. But everything we *need* to know about science is there. God created the universe, for instance. Chance had nothing to do with it. Human beings were created as special and unique, totally distinct from the animals. Everything that matters . . . about everything that matters.

I recently spoke at a Christian high school weekend retreat. They asked me to preach on John 15, the passage where Jesus

teaches about the vine and the branches. Jesus' primary call to His disciples in that passage is that they "remain in me." Jesus begins to explain what this means in verse 7 when He says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you..." Then in verse 10 He makes it plain, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love." We spent the weekend talking about the importance of giving our best to obeying God's Word—the Bible.

At the end of the weekend we had a question-and-answer session. A young man asked me a great question: "Can you be a Christian and not go to church? I don't like going to church." A group of students around this young man seemed to share his sentiments. I began my answer this way: "If a person claims to be a follower of Jesus, and is not faithfully involved in the local church, then he or she is a disobedient Christian. I can't comment on anyone's salvation, but in Hebrews 10:25 God says that we should 'not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.'"

The young man responded, "I get that, but we don't like our church. Here's what we want to do. We're going to meet at our friend's house every Friday night, sing some songs, pray, and talk about Jesus. Our youth pastor told us that church was all about encouraging each other spiritually, so that's what we want to do. What do you think about that?"

I replied, "Wow! I love what you're talking about. You're committing to meet every Friday night with your friends to focus on spiritual growth together? That's terrific. I do have a couple questions for you. First, will there be preaching of the Bible when you meet?"

"No."

"Will you have baptisms?"

"No."

"Will you have communion?"

"No."

"Will you have multiple, biblically qualified elders there?"

"No."

“Again, I don’t have anything negative to say about your meeting every week like you described. It sounds wonderful. But... it’s not a church. Church is not man’s idea. We didn’t think it up. Church is God’s idea. He’s the one who instituted it, and He is the one who gave us, in the Scriptures, the patterns and practices that He wants for it.”

“Well, Pastor Rob, where does it say in the Bible that you have to have elders?”

At this point, I confess... I got lucky. I likely wouldn’t have known the answer to that question off the top of my head. But God knew that this question would come my way this weekend, and so a few days earlier I “just happened” to be reading in the book of Titus. So I replied, “In Titus 1:5, Paul instructs the church that the first thing they were to do is appoint elders in every town.”

At that moment, the young man responded with a question I’ll never forget. He said, “How about another one?” In other words, do you have *another* Bible passage that supports what you’re saying?

My heart fell inside of me, and I quietly said, “I didn’t know I needed more than one.” This was a retreat with students who professed faith in Christ. I realized in that moment that this young man and I were not having a disagreement about the nature of church—but rather a disagreement about the nature of the Bible. This young man, like many of his Christian peers, did not view the Bible as a *sufficient* guide for life—in this case, the particular nature and function of the church. He’d asked me a question. I answered his question with a plain Scripture. It wasn’t enough to change his mind, nor the minds of many around him. The Bible alone was not enough. Yet, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

I frequently ask groups of Christian youth and young adults the following four questions. First, “Do you believe the Bible is God’s Word?” All the hands go up. Second, “Do you believe it

is completely true?” Again, all the hands show. Now things get dicey. The third question, “Are you willing to submit all your thoughts and opinions on every matter to what it says?” A few hands rise from the crowd. Finally, “Are you willing to do what it says, even if you don’t want to?” Again, only a few hands go up. In regard to this last question, I’m not talking about the willful disobedience that we struggle with on a daily basis. On many occasions we know exactly what we’re doing, that it’s against God’s Word, and we choose to do it anyway. Rather, I’m talking about the Christian who says, “I know the Bible says that this isn’t right, but I don’t think the Bible is completely relevant on this topic.”

The twentieth century saw what Francis Schaeffer called a new kind of Christian—a person who claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ, someone who “loves Jesus,” but who does not believe the Bible. Millions of young people grew up on an anemic diet of Sunday school Bible stories, and the end result, as they moved into adulthood, was that the Bible remained a nice story with some valuable wisdom. They were neither taught, nor did they embrace the central Christian doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture for all matters of faith and life. When young people distance their hearts and minds from not only the inerrancy of Scripture but its sufficiency, spiritual deterioration is inevitable.

Pluralism and relativism are no longer found just “out there” in the culture around us; they can frequently be found in the halls and sanctuaries of our churches. But we can easily slip into a mode of blaming the list of outside forces that robbed faith from our children. We bring to mind the non-Christian friends they spent time with, the atheistic professors at college, or the youth pastors that didn’t do enough to help. All these influences may be at work, but we must face even deeper issues if we want to embrace the mission of pointing the hearts of our children to Christ.

In this chapter we’ve considered changes in our culture and in our churches. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to the issues in our own homes.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. What words would you use, positive or negative, to describe your children's generation?
2. Do you believe your children's generation thinks differently than yours? How?
3. In your opinion, what changes have occurred in our public schools from the time you were growing up to today?⁷
4. Can you identify specific issues over which Christians have lost their conviction about the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture?