

Foreword by **Nick Foles**
Super Bowl MVP

Sean McDowell
and
J. Warner Wallace



**SO THE
NEXT
GENERATION
WILL
KNOW**



*Preparing Young Christians
for a Challenging World*

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transforming lives together

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Nick Foles	19
Preface	
LOVE SACRIFICES	23
SECTION 1	
DO YOU LOVE ME?	29
Making Young People Our Priority	
Chapter 1	
LOVE RESPONDS	31
Examining the Challenge Before Us	
Chapter 2	
LOVE UNDERSTANDS	47
Recognizing the Uniqueness of This Generation	
Chapter 3	
LOVE RELATES	63
Connecting with the Hearts of Young People	
Chapter 4	
LOVE EQUIPS	79
Giving Kids a Worldview That Brings Significance	

SECTION 2

WILL YOU SHOW ME? 99

Preparing Young People for the Future

Chapter 5

LOVE IGNITES 101

Developing a Passion for Truth

Chapter 6

LOVE TRAINS 119

Resisting the Desire to Entertain Rather Than Train

Chapter 7

LOVE EXPLORES 139

Providing Life-Changing Adventures for Students

Chapter 8

LOVE ENGAGES 161

Preparing Students through Movies, Music, Social Media, and Current Events

Postscript

LOVE BEGINS 177

Appendix 181

Acknowledgments 195

Notes 197



SECTION 1

DO YOU LOVE ME?

MAKING YOUNG PEOPLE OUR PRIORITY

Chapter 1

LOVE RESPONDS

EXAMINING THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US

Challenges require a response, and the church is facing a *true challenge*: young people in America and Europe are leaving the Christian church at an unprecedented rate.

I (J. Warner) first noticed the problem when I was a youth pastor. I took over leadership from my energetic, young predecessor, who had grown the group into a robust, engaged collection of junior high and high school students. Many had been raised together in the church, and they invited their friends to join the group. As a result, our students had deep relationships that bound them together.

In my first year as their pastor, I leaned heavily on my training as an artist (I have a BA in design and an MA in architecture). Our meetings were interactive, artistic, and experiential, incorporating music, imagery, and other sensory elements. The students seemed to enjoy the approach, and over time the group grew even larger.

But our results were *terrible*.

SOMETHING TIMELY



A recent study found that nearly 95 percent of teenagers in America have access to a smartphone.¹

In the past, young people encountered skepticism primarily from their friends or from professors in the university.

Today, the internet is easily accessed on smartphones and mobile devices, bringing the most ardent skepticism home to the next generation at a very young age.

For this reason, we should expect the objections from young people to be far more articulate and well researched. Our responses must meet the challenge offered by internet skeptics, and we must start training our youth earlier than ever before.

Not long after graduating the first seniors, we found that most of them walked away from Christianity in the initial weeks of their freshman year at college. Many of our current students were still in touch with these new non-believers, and when I heard that they now rejected the existence of God, I was crushed, and I accepted the blame.

In the year since becoming their pastor, I had come to *love* these students. I felt a paternal responsibility to them. Like the apostle John, I

wanted “no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (3 John 1:4 NASB). When I heard that most of my graduating seniors had strayed from the family, I reconciled myself to the fact that I hadn’t adequately prepared them for life after youth group. I thought, *I must be the worst youth pastor ever*. Then I started to study the issue more deeply and found that I wasn’t alone.

If you’re a youth pastor, Christian educator, or parent, I bet you’ve got a story of your own about a young ex-believer you love who was raised in the church. We’ve all got a student, son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, niece, or nephew who has walked away from the truth. This isn’t just an anecdotal problem. It’s a national crisis. And it’s also *personal*. Everywhere we travel, we hear heart-breaking stories from caring adults who know young people who

have abandoned their faith. It can be especially hard when these are *our own kids*.

We've collected the studies about this phenomenon for more than fifteen years. Here are five things we've learned from the data:²

THE GROUP IS LARGE

The youngest generation in America is quickly becoming the *largest* generation in America. Born between 2000 and 2015, school-aged Christians are part of what has been termed "Generation Z" (aka, "Gen Z"). Other popular titles include "Post Millennials," "The App Generation," "The Selfie Generation," "Homelanders," and "iGen." You may have some of these young people in your own family. If not, they're certainly in your church and community. More importantly, Gen Z is projected to very quickly become the largest demographic group in the world (comprising 32 percent of the global population)³ and is already the single largest media audience in the nation.⁴ There's a reason

IF YOU'RE A PARENT ASK A FEW QUESTIONS



We sometimes take the spiritual growth of our kids for granted. Although they may continue to attend church with us, they may be far less committed to (or interested in) Christianity and also be reluctant to share their concerns and doubts.

Begin asking important questions, even at an early age:

- "What do you think is the most difficult thing to believe about Christianity?"
- "Of all the things the pastor said today, what seemed the most difficult to believe?"
- "What is your biggest question or doubt about Christianity?"
- "What do your skeptical friends say about Christianity?"

These are good questions because they are "open" questions (they can't be answered with a short "yes" or "no"), and they can serve to launch deeper conversations.

Don't rush to respond. Instead, be a good listener and use the data you collect to structure and inspire your own studies. And be sure to communicate in both your words and your body language that you are okay with their questions and doubts.

Make a list of the questions you want to be able to answer for your kids and begin to research the answers in preparation for your next conversation.

SO THE NEXT GENERATION WILL KNOW

why the church needs to address the youngest members of our family. They outnumber us, and they are our future.

THE PROBLEM IS REAL

Gen Z has become the embodiment of an important (and disturbing) trend. Recent surveys and studies reveal that Gen Z is the least religious of all generations in America. In fact, “the percentage of teens who identify as atheist is double that of the general population.”⁵ This data is consistent with recent historical data. The number of young people leaving the church over the past twenty years is *staggering*. According to one study at UCLA, 52 percent of college students reported frequent church attendance the year before they entered college, but only 29 percent continued frequent church attendance by their junior year.⁶ A variety of studies report that 50 to 70 percent of young Christians walk away from the church by the time they are in their college years.⁷ Even those who don’t leave find themselves struggling to believe Christianity is true. Approximately 40 to 50 percent of students in youth groups struggle in their faith after graduation.⁸

THE REASONS ARE REVEALING

Researchers have been asking young ex-Christians *why* they leave the church, and their answers are enlightening. Here are the most popular student responses from four different studies:

“Some stuff is too far-fetched for me to believe.”

“Too many questions that can’t be answered.”⁹

“I’m a scientist now, and I don’t believe in miracles.”

“I learned about evolution when I went away to college.”

“There is a lack of any sort of scientific or specific evidence of a creator.”

“I just realized somewhere along the line that I didn’t really believe it.”

“I’m doing a lot more learning, studying, and kind of making decisions myself rather than listening to someone else.”¹⁰

“Because I grew up and realized it was a story like Santa or the Easter Bunny.”

“As I learn more about the world around me and understand things that I once did not, I find that the thought of an all-powerful being to be less and less believable.”

“I realized that religion is in complete contradiction with the rational and scientific world, and to continue to subscribe to a religion would be hypocritical.”

“It no longer fits into what I understand of the universe.”¹¹

“I have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world.”

“There are too many injustices in the history of Christianity.”

“I had a bad experience at church with a Christian.”¹²

SO THE NEXT GENERATION WILL KNOW

Do you see what we see? Most of these responses involve some form of *unanswered, intellectual skepticism*. Young believers struggle to answer tough questions from a Christian perspective. In addition to the intellectual doubts listed here, young ex-believers also cite hypocrisy and bad behavior on the part of fellow Christians. Young people are seeking a reasonable worldview that makes sense of reality.

THE DEPARTURE IS EARLY

While it's tempting to believe that secular universities—influenced by the natural sciences—are the sole reason young believers walk away from the church, the data doesn't support this claim. Most young people abandon their Christian faith while they are *still at home with their parents*. Today, incoming college freshmen, when surveyed *before* they enter college, are *three times* more likely to report that they are religiously unaffiliated than freshmen who entered college in 1986. Seventy-nine percent of these young people say they walked away from Christianity during their adolescent and teen years.¹³ Many reported that they left the faith between the ages of ten and seventeen.¹⁴

THE FUTURE IS STILL BRIGHT

Despite the ominous findings of recent studies, young people who leave Christianity aren't necessarily leaving *God*. Eighty-eight percent of Americans report believing in *some kind* of God, higher power, or spiritual force, even if that being is not the God of the Bible.¹⁵ Even among those who now claim *no* religious affiliation, known

as “nones,” 17 percent still say they believe in the God as described in the Bible, and 53 percent say they believe in a higher power or spiritual force. Even 18 percent of self-proclaimed *atheists* say they believe in some kind of higher, spiritual power. Young people who leave the church are still interested in spiritual things. They’re *not* lost causes. They are willing to listen if we will listen *first*.

In fact, the act of *listening* is at the core of the solution. Looking at the data, one might conclude that the church simply needs to do a better job of teaching truth and making the case for Christianity, but that’s only *part* of the answer. Young people are seeking reasonable explanations and *authentic relationships*; these are the two inseparable rails that will lead us toward a solution.

A BIBLICAL WAY FORWARD

As a first-year youth pastor, I (J. Warner) focused solely on relationships and

IF YOU’RE A YOUTH PASTOR OR MINISTER PRESENT A FEW QUESTIONS



Youth group can be an intimidating place for students to ask questions or reveal what they really think about Christianity, especially if we haven’t cultivated a ministry that embraces doubt.

When I (J. Warner) was a youth pastor, I met with my students on Sundays and then one additional weeknight in the home of one of our youth leaders. A home environment allowed us to soften the context for our discussions and strengthen our sense of “family.”

During these weeknight meetings, we implemented a “You Ask It Bag.” It was simply a large paper shopping bag in which students could place their questions, anonymously, about anything they wanted answered.

The bag was ever present at our meetings, and during the second half of each session, we would gather around the bag and begin drawing out questions. The bag accomplished two goals. First, it allowed students to ask questions safely. Second, it provided an incentive for our youth workers and volunteers to prepare themselves with good answers.

If you decide to use this approach, you might want to “seed” the bag with some of the common objections we’ve listed in this chapter so students who may be hesitant to voice their skepticism openly can hear an adequate response. In any case, the questions your students are asking can be used to plan future messages.

SO THE NEXT GENERATION WILL KNOW

experiences. As I mentioned, I inherited an interactive group with deep, personal connections and friendships, and I feared they wouldn't accept me as the newcomer. So I spent months creating weekend events with the goal of deepening my relationship with each student. Each Sunday meeting provided students with plenty of interaction time. I'll be honest, I was more concerned about one question than any other: "Will they like me?"

Within months, I had gained their trust and confidence, but my focus on artistic experiences and relationships was *not* enough. I errantly believed that if they were still coming every week, they must think Christianity is true. As it turned out, some were just showing up because it was a safe place to hang out with people who loved them.

Relationships are incredibly important. University of Southern California sociology professor Vern Bengtson has commissioned a massive study on religious faith transmission since 1970. It involves four-generation families of more than 3,500 grandparents, parents, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Regardless of the particular religion, he has found that a warm relationship with the parents, and in particular the father, is the single most important factor in faith transmission. He also has discovered that healthy relationships with grandparents and the wider religious community are important for faith transmission.¹⁶

It is hard to overstate the importance of relationships. When I (Sean) taught high school full time, I worked diligently to build relationships with my students. I attended sporting events. My wife and I went to school dances. I looked to have conversations with

students outside the classroom. And I took students on mission trips. I even participated in a school play!

But here is the reality: *kids need more than relationships*. Relationships alone are not enough. Christian students will find non-Christian, safe places to hang out once they get to the university. If it's only about relationships, you can expect students to find a community that will allow them to chase their passions without limitation or condemnation, especially if they've already decided Christianity isn't true. In fact, their desire to chase their passions may be the driving factor in their decision to reject Christianity. That's what many of us are inclined to do as fallen, sinful humans.

But make no mistake about it, truth alone is not enough *either*. Factual claims about God (or anything else for that matter) can sound like little more than "Blah, blah, blah" if they are delivered apart from an authentic relationship with someone who truly cares about you. Theology and apologetics can seem empty if we don't connect truth to how we live.

God calls us to truth *and* relationship. He possesses and demonstrates the perfect balance between justice and mercy, law and grace. If we want to impact students and teach them the truth about Christianity, we need to do our best to participate in this divine, relational balancing act. This is the approach the apostle Paul took. He shared not only the gospel with the Thessalonians but also *his very own life* (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

At our speaking engagements and community events, we are often approached by parents who sense their kids are starting to drift from their Christian foundation. We are regularly asked,

IF YOU'RE A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR

POLL YOUR STUDENTS



Even in Christian schools, the spectrum of belief and certainty can be surprisingly broad.

Some of your students are likely to have questions like the ones uncovered in the studies we've examined.

Depending on the relationship you've developed with your students, invite them to raise questions during one of your classes. If it's early in your semester—before you've had the chance to develop trust—ask them to submit their questions anonymously. Consider asking for responses to such topics as: "If you could ask God one question, what would it be?" or "If you could ask God to explain one confusing thing, what would it be?"

Make a list of the questions you receive, and work as a group to organize them into similar categories. Next, devote a section of your whiteboard or chalkboard to publicly remember the questions.

During your semester together, do your best to answer the inquiries directly, and refer to the list whenever a topic arises that fits into one of the categories.

As you're publicly recognizing and charting the questions, acknowledge the validity of investigating in the first place. Let your classroom be a place where these kinds of questions and discussions are welcome.

"What book can I give to my son (or daughter) to help them answer their questions about Christianity?" Books are great, and we've written our share, but unless you're willing to read them together with your kids or students (and they, too, are willing to read along), books can only provide truth *without* a personal relationship.

The better question might be, "What do *I* need to know to help my daughter (or son) answer the questions they have about Christianity? What do *I* need to do to strengthen the relationships I have with my kids so I can continue to speak into their lives and become the kind of person they want to engage with on these issues?" When we encourage parents to become the best Christian apologists their kids will ever know, we do so because we understand the connection between truth and relationships. Given this reality, here are a few suggestions based on the data we've already described:

MAKE A COMMITMENT

Let the statistics related to Gen Z and their departure from the church sink in a bit. Allow the sobering numbers to ignite a fire in your soul. God has a role for each of us in this time of crisis, even though He is still in complete control. We are called to *respond*. The apostle Paul understood a similar calling when he wrote his letter to the Colossians. He knew he would have to sacrifice his comfort and his desires to accomplish a greater work. To serve the church as a leader, minister, and steward, he committed himself to the mission: “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (Colossians 1:29 NASB). Each of us, in our own small way, can contribute to the important work of raising the next generation of Christians if we will simply *commit ourselves* to the task.

START EARLY

According to the statistics, young Christians decide to abandon the church long before they ever tell anyone and usually before they leave the homes of their parents. Polls continue to show that most people in America will become Christian *prior* to the age of fifteen. In fact, one large evangelical study found that the median age of conversion was *eleven*.¹⁷ Why are older teens and young adults less likely to become Christians? If their own answers tell us anything, it’s based on their intellectual skepticism, and the age of doubt and cynicism appears to be *dropping*. That’s why it’s so important for us to start *early*—even before your kids are verbalizing their questions. Moses instructed the Israelites to include children in their midst

SO THE NEXT GENERATION WILL KNOW

when talking about (or celebrating) God “so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 31:12 NASB). It’s tempting to think your church’s high school youth ministry can eventually address the issues we’ve described, but the data tells a different story. We must start much earlier.

TAKE ON THE TOUGH ISSUES

Take another look at some of the responses offered by young people in the studies we’ve cited. Imagine getting some of these questions from the young Christians in your life:

“What scientific proof do you have that God exists?”

“Why should I believe in miracles?”

“If evolution is true, why should I believe in God?”

“Why should I trust something on ‘faith’ when I could use ‘reason’?”

“Why should I trust what you or my pastor has to say about Christianity?”

“How is believing in God any different from believing in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny?”

“Why does science seem to contradict the claims of Christianity?”

“Why would an all-powerful, all-loving God allow so much evil in the world?”

“How can I be sure Jesus really rose from the grave?”

“If Christianity is true, why are so many Christians hypocrites?”

“Why is the history of Christianity filled with so much violence?”

“Why should I care about any of this to begin with?”

Are you ready to answer these difficult questions? Most of us *aren't*. But the data tells us that these are *precisely* the kinds of questions we need to be prepared to answer if we want to help young people find the truth and follow the Savior. Don't let these difficult questions intimidate you. God is bigger than any of these objections, and each question listed here *can* be answered. Jesus told His followers to be courageous in the face of far greater oppression and resistance (read Matthew 10:16–20). How much more confident should we be that the Spirit of our Father will speak through us if we are willing to discuss the toughest issues?

BE PATIENT

I (J. Warner) wasn't raised in a Christian home. I was thirty-five years old before I set foot in an evangelical church for anything other than a wedding or a funeral. If you would have known me just one month prior to that

SOMETHING TIMELESS



The apostle Peter told his readers:

“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

Peter encouraged his readers to defend the *truth*, but he did so in the context of *relationship*. We're commanded to answer the person who is asking the question, rather than simply answer the *objection* being offered. That's why Peter told his readers to be gentle and respectful. These characteristics of engagement are both relational *and* tactical. They help us build healthy relationships from which truth can be proclaimed, and they set the stage so that if we “are slandered, those who revile [our] good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (verse 16).

The connection between truth and relationship is timeless.

SO THE NEXT GENERATION WILL KNOW

time, you would have said, “Man, that Jim Wallace will *never* become a Christian.” I was sarcastic and adamant about my position as an atheist. Yet here I am today, part of the Christian family. When Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9 NASB), he could have been writing about *me*. My personal experience of transformation has given me great patience with my own children. While I understand the urgency of the gospel, I also understand the timing of God.

I (Sean) learned this lesson of patience when a former student came back to sit in my high school apologetics class. It surprised me because this young man, when he was a senior in high school, asked me the minimal work he needed to do to get a C- so his parents would pay for his car insurance. He seemed to care little about the class. Then why was he back visiting? While attending a local junior college, some of his professors directly challenged his beliefs about God, creation, and the historical Jesus. I asked him if there was anything I could have done differently when he was in high school to better motivate and prepare him, and I will never forget his response. He nonchalantly said, “No. I simply wasn’t there spiritually. I had to graduate and be challenged before I realized how important it is. But I was listening more than you probably think.”

Be patient with yourself if you don’t seem to have all the right answers or if the young people you’re leading don’t seem to be progressing as quickly as you might like. Just do your job. Study to be approved. Speak the truth. Love young people. The rest is in God’s timing.

STAY BALANCED

Finally, recognize the fact that several of the responses from young people are centered on broken relationships (i.e., “I had a bad experience at church with a Christian”). When people don’t believe something we know to be true, it’s easy to lean more toward the *proclamation of truth* rather than toward the *building of relationships*. Don’t give in to that inclination. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and commanded him to defend the truth and to “instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines” (1 Timothy 1:3 NASB). But Paul understood the delicate balance between truth and love, doctrine and relationship. He told Timothy that the “goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5 NASB). Our instruction—especially toward those who are younger—is a vehicle for truth, fueled by loving relationships. Our challenge is to avoid tilting our approach too far in either direction.

It shouldn’t surprise us that the secret to Christian education is based on this connection between truth and relationships. The psalmist wrote that the entirety (the sum) of God’s Word is *truth* (Psalm 119:160), and Jesus described Himself as *the truth* (John 14:6–7). Truth, from a Christian perspective, emanates,

SOMETHING TIMEWORTHY



What idea (or ideas) most resonated with you as you read this chapter? What concepts are worthy of

consideration?

Idea(s):

With whom could you (or *should* you) share this concept or information?

Person you have in mind:

SO THE NEXT GENERATION WILL KNOW

therefore, from a triune God who has been in relationship (with the Son and the Holy Spirit) for all eternity. And He enters into the human race to have a relationship with each one of us (John 17:3). So, as you read this book, remember that our model for teaching apologetics and Christian worldview is anchored and rooted in a uniquely Christian approach that unites truth to relationship, law to grace, justice to mercy.