

## **Living Proof**

**By David Feddes**

An apologetics ministry commissioned a study to find out why so many young people are leaving the church. They published their findings in a book with the title *Already Gone*. In that book they found that roughly 60-80% of teens and twenty-somethings have been leaving the church. They found that some left because of experiences or ideas they came upon in college, but many had already tuned out the church during their middle school or high school years when they were still sitting in church because somebody made them go.

Why would so many leave the church? The apologetics ministry that commissioned the study suggested that part of the problem was not enough apologetics. One finding of the study was that Sunday school attendance makes it LESS likely that kids will remain in church. Why? According to the authors, real biblical history is treated as cute stories in too many Sunday schools. Divine truth becomes entertaining. Kids get a signal that these are tales to amuse them, not real events to be taken seriously. Cute stories don't introduce kids to a real, awesome God. Instead, God is more along the lines of *Sesame Street*. When kids outgrow *Sesame Street*, they outgrow God. The authors of the study suggest that better biblical instruction and stronger apologetics would help. They call for taking biblical history more seriously and taking the great and awesome God more seriously. They urge better apologetics in explaining and defending biblical truth. This, they say, will help youth to understand that the Bible is about reality; the Scriptures are not sugary stories for children that can be abandoned when they're no longer children.

I think there's a lot of truth in that, but I don't think it's the whole truth. I teach apologetics, so I obviously think apologetics can be helpful. However, I don't think lack of apologetics or clear teaching is the only reason, or even the main reason, many young people leave the church.

Spiritual life in Christ is caught, not just taught. If there are problems in how it's taught, those must be addressed; but we also have to ask why it's not being caught. Why are people missing out on the reality of the life of Jesus Christ, even when they're growing up in congregations? Are young people abandoning the Christian community because they have not been seeing or tasting the Christ life there? If you're already experiencing and tasting the Christ life and knowing the reality of Jesus Christ firsthand, you can believe without apologetics. And if you're not tasting the Christ life, apologetic arguments can ring hollow. Are the dropouts from church lacking a living encounter with God, a delight in public worship, and loving communion in the body of Christ? Do they see people loving one another? Do they sense a spirit of awe when the people are worshiping God together? Have they encountered God? If they haven't encountered God, they are not likely to stick with the church throughout their lives.

Let's not fool ourselves by thinking that all will be well if people just get good teaching and solid answers to tough questions. They don't just need various evidences and logical proofs. They need living proof. They need to see such proof in the lives of Christians around them, and they need to see proof of the life of Christ within themselves. They need to be part of a dynamic community of God's people, and they need daily interaction with God, a daily walk with God.

### **Why follow Christ when so many churchgoers are hypocrites?**

If you talk with people who reject Christianity or have a hard time believing, one common question is: Why follow Christ when so many churchgoers are hypocrites?

Usually this question is either a shallow excuse or a sign of a deep wound. It can be a flimsy excuse for brushing you off and saying, "Don't talk to me about Christ." On the other hand, it

may indicate that they have been wounded by people claiming to be Christians: churchgoers, church leaders, parents, or others who did terrible things to them or set a horrible example.

How do you know whether they're making shallow excuses or have suffered a deep wound? Listen to find out. Ask, "Were you ever hurt deeply by a church? Were you ever hurt deeply by a churchgoer who is close to you?" If they have suffered personal hurt, show love and compassion. Share in their pain and sorrow, before making any attempt to answer their objection.

If you find out they haven't really been wounded personally but are just using hypocrites as a general excuse to avoid Jesus and church, you can challenge them more directly. Here are a few ways that you might cut through their excuse-making.

- Tell them, "Don't judge Jesus by his worst followers. Listen to Jesus himself. Focus on him, rather than those who have not been following him."
- Ask, "Are you perfectly pure and honest? If not, what makes you too good to associate with the flawed people in church? Be glad sinners are allowed in church. They might have room for one more: you!"
- Point out, "If you've discovered a perfect church and joined it, your very presence would spoil it."

For those who are using hypocrites as a shallow excuse for avoiding Jesus and church, these are some plain, straightforward ways to challenge them. Those who have been deeply hurt, however, need to be touched with the love of Christ, not just challenged and corrected.

At one level, it's lame to say that you're not going to follow Christ just because some churchgoers are hypocrites. It's easy to show the silliness of such an objection. On the other hand, there is still a gut-level force to the objection that if Jesus is so great, his greatness should be evident in his followers. If Christianity is true, we shouldn't need a bunch of smart explanations to defend it. The reality should speak for itself.

Let me be honest. It is harder for me to believe God is real when church gatherings seem dull and church people seem not to be full of Christ's life and the Spirit's fruit. I can have my head full of apologetic arguments and proofs and evidences for the faith, yet when I see very little of the reality of God and God's life in the people around me, it drags down the strength of my faith and weakens my sense of God's reality.

It is especially hard for me to believe God is real when my personal walk with the Lord seems dull, when I have fallen into sin, when my own life has little evidence of Christ's life and the Spirit's fruit. I can't just think myself into stronger faith and force myself to get excited about the things of God when I've been living like a hypocrite.

It is hard to take Jesus seriously when you yourself are completely unlike Jesus, or when those claiming to be Jesus' followers are nothing like Jesus. As Jesus put it, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:16). Truth is known by its fruits. In order for us to persuade people of gospel truth, our lives must bear gospel fruits.

### **Can other people see and taste gospel truth in you?**

People should be able to see gospel truth in you. "You are the light of the world," said Jesus. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14,16). People should also be able to taste gospel truth in you. "You are the salt of the earth," according to Jesus (Matthew 5:13). When trying to introduce non-Christians to Jesus, wise words and good answers must be seasoned with gracious godliness. "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be

gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Colossians 4:5-6). Can other people see and taste gospel truth in you?

In the century after the New Testament was written, a Christian called Mathetes wrote a letter to someone named Diognetus, a person wanting to know more about the faith. One of the strongest apologetic arguments used by Mathetes was the transformation of people who believed in Jesus. He emphasized that Christians lived very differently from other people.

They live in their own countries, but as people whose true home is elsewhere... They have babies; but they don't destroy fetuses. They have a common table, but not a common bed... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven... They love all men, and are persecuted by all... They are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice, yet those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred... Do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing... He who carries the burden of his neighbor; he who uses whatever advantage he has over someone to help that person; he who takes what God gives him and distributes it to people in need, becomes a god to those who receive his benefits: he is an imitator of God. Then you will see while you are still on earth that God in the heavens rules over the universe. (Epistle to Diognetus)

When people are imitators of God, that is one of the most powerful apologetic arguments for the Christian faith.

### **The final apologetic: love**

Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love is living proof of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. I like the title of Voddie Baucham's book *The Ever-Loving Truth*. Real truth is ever loving.

The great apologist Francis Schaeffer said, "Without true Christians loving one another, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers." People will know we are Christ's disciples by our love, not just by our good answers. Schaeffer goes on to say,

Let us be careful, indeed, to spend a lifetime studying to give honest answers. For years the orthodox, evangelical church has done this very poorly. So it is well to spend time learning to answer the questions of men who are about us. But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that **the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.**

Love is the final apologetic.

Your manner adorns your message, the truth you're trying to bring to other. The apostle Peter said it so well:

But in your heart set apart Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with **gentleness and respect**, keeping a **clear conscience**, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Peter 3:15-16).

When you have a clear conscience and a gentle, respectful way of dealing with people, they will be more likely to be persuaded by the way you defend gospel truth.

### **Irresistible holiness**

The great apologist C. S. Lewis wrote a letter to a Christian woman who was wondering how she could help a person who wasn't willing to listen to any good arguments in favor of

Christianity. Lewis said, “Where people can resist and ignore arguments they may be unable to resist **lives**. I am afraid, my dear lady, the only hope lies in you and in any other Christian friends she has.” Many people can’t be won by Christian arguments; they can only be won by Christian lives. Lewis declared that real holiness would be irresistible. He wrote, “If even 10% of the world’s population had it, would not the whole world be converted and happy before a year’s end?” Lewis may have exaggerated a bit, but just imagine. If 10% of the world’s population had Christ-like holiness, what an impact they would make!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of my favorite preachers, said, “The greatest need of the church today is the personal holiness of its ministers.” A. W. Tozer wrote,

Holiness is a sense of awareness of the other world, a mysterious quality and difference that has come to rest upon some men... a good man with this special quality and mysterious Presence is morally right and walking in all the holy ways of God and carries upon himself without even knowing it the fragrance of a kingdom that is supreme above the kingdoms of this world.

Old Testament priests in the tabernacle worked with objects that were anointed with a special scented oil. When they came out of the holy place, the scent of holiness came with them. Tozer suggested that today those who spend time in the presence of the holy God will have this fragrance of holiness about them. Tozer also spoke of Moses’ radiance after spending time with God.

When Moses came back everyone could tell where he had been. The lightning still played over his countenance, the glory of the Presence remained. This strange something which men cannot pin down or identify was there. I lament that this mysterious quality of holy Presence has all but forsaken the earth in our day.

Tozer added, “If we are what we ought to be in Christ and by His Spirit, if the whole sum of our lives beginning with the inner life is becoming more Godlike and Christlike, I believe something of that divine and mysterious quality and Presence will be upon us.” Notice he says “beginning with the inner life.” If you are a person of prayer, of communion, with God, a person of the Word, a person of worship, a person desiring more and more of God’s reality and holiness, your inner life will cause a mysterious quality to shine from you. In Tozer’s words,

I have met a few of God’s saints who appeared to have this holy brightness upon them, but they did not know it because of their humility and gentleness of spirit. I do not hesitate to confess that my fellowship with them has meant more to me than all of the teaching I have ever received. I do stand deeply indebted to every Bible teacher I have had through the years, but they did little but instruct my head. The brethren I have known who had this strange and mysterious quality and awareness of God’s Person and Presence instructed my heart...

According to Tozer, such holiness is vital to our life in Christ and our witness to others.

First, bring your life into line morally so that God can make it holy; then bring your spiritual life into line that God may settle upon you with the Holy Ghost—with that quality of the Wonderful and the Mysterious and the Divine... Oh, that we might yearn for the knowledge and Presence of God in our lives from moment to moment, so that without human cultivation and without toilsome seeking there would come upon us **this endowment that gives meaning to our witness!** It is a sweet and radiant fragrance and I suggest that in some of our churches it may be strongly sensed and felt.

Effective witness is not just a matter of accurate teaching or persuasive evidence. It is a matter of the very presence of God experienced by us and shining from us.

## Living Proof

Communications scholar Marshall McLuhan had a famous saying: “The medium is the message.” Your message is not just what you say but your means of saying it. For Christians spreading the gospel, the medium is the message. We share the gospel not just in speech but by the medium of lives filled with truth, goodness, love, and holiness.

- **Truth:** knowing, explaining, and making the case for biblical, gospel truth
- **Goodness:** doing right as God commands
- **Love:** adoring God and loving others
- **Holiness:** communing with the Holy One and shining with His holy otherness

These realities form a powerful witness. Lives like this get people’s attention. They know there’s something different about you, and it’s not because you are weird. You are truly different because another world has taken hold of you. Another life has come to live within you. In order to be powerful apologists for the Lord, we ourselves need to be living proof. The more we grow in godly characteristics, the better we will represent God.

- **Grow in knowledge:** Study Scripture and learn as best you can how to explain and defend the faith.
- **Grow in goodness:** Obey commands; bear fruit.
- **Grow in love:** Love as Christ has loved you. More persuasion-arguments; less bicker-arguments.
- **Grow in holiness:** Spend time each day with God, making sure you know him and stay connected.

When the church is filled with truth, goodness, love, and holiness, people may heed our explanations and evidences—but not until then. The reality of Christ must shine from us. As an old saint said, “Always preach. Use words when necessary.” Be living proof of the reality of Jesus Christ.