

COLLEGE TRANSITION INITIATIVE

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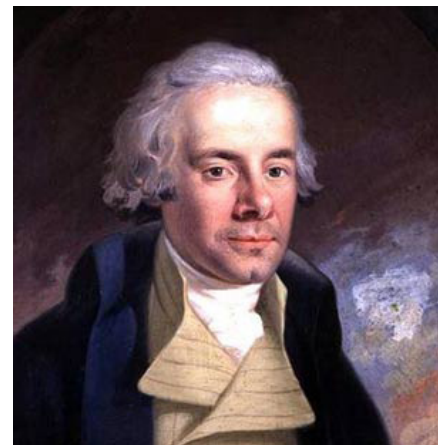
WHY YOUNG PEOPLE ABANDON FAITH: LESSONS FROM WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

By Derek Melleby

College transition is a hot topic in youth ministry circles. More and more parents and churches are recognizing that students are not prepared for the challenges that college often brings. Anecdotal evidence is easy to find. There are many stories of students who have grown up in the church, have made commitments to follow Jesus, but have walked away from the faith during the college years. There have been numerous research projects that support these stories as well, making a strong case that the college years have not been good to those raised in the Christian faith.

The research is important and worth reading, to be sure, but I'm not sure it matters all that much. We can debate the statistics, trying to convince ourselves that it is not as bad as some say it is; or tell personal stories to make it seem even worse; or we can recognize that the challenge for students to make the faith their own is a perennial one. The challenge will always be with us. As the writer of Ecclesiastes suggests: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." This verse gives perspective. In all times and in all places, at some point, young people have to take ownership of their faith. This is not new.

I was reminded of this recently when I read *Real Christianity* by William Wilberforce, the member of the British Parliament who worked to abolish slavery. Written in 1797, Wilberforce makes keen observations about why young people often walk away from the faith. We can learn much from his insights regarding the human condition:



William Wilberforce's words remind us that the problem of students leaving the faith after high school is not new and the reasons for why students drift away are unlikely to change. Learning from the past can help us in the present to ensure that our ministries are addressing the central challenges students face.

“Think about what happens to many young people who are raised with all the benefits of prosperous parents who are cultural Christians themselves. As children, they are taken to church, where they hear the parts of the Christian message that their particular church embraces. Although it is rare in our times, maybe they even receive some measure of religious instruction at home. Eventually, they leave home, and launch out into the world. Some go to work; some go to college. They face temptations that they have not faced before and give in to them. Their lives might get out of control with the use of alcohol, and they might give in to sexual indulgence. At the least, they never read the Bible or make any attempt to develop a spiritual life. Most don’t even attempt to take what knowledge is at their disposal and form their own beliefs and convictions. They don’t learn to think.

“Maybe they travel to a foreign country. Things are even worse there. They begin to embrace the ideas to which they are exposed. By the time they return home, they are further away from faith than before. Along with their previous frivolous way of life, they now begin to be consumed with the demands of making a living in the workplace and the desire for a career and success. Most of what they hear about Christianity is in a negative context. If they go to church at all, they hear things that either make no sense to them or that they find offensive to the way they live. They have no grasp of the Bible to compare with what they hear.

“The result is an attitude toward Christianity that is not only negative but also one that is rooted in a faulty sense of intellectual superiority. The young also have a way of seeing right through the charade of those who profess

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**– William Wilberforce,
1797**

the faith but don’t live the life. What began as a vague, almost imperceptible doubt soon grows. By slow and steady degrees, the doubt becomes most fixed in their minds. In a twisted kind of way, the young men and women begin to hope their doubt is well founded. Any reason that reinforces it is welcomed. Doubt becomes greater, not based on evidence, but merely by dwelling in the mind. This is certainly not always how it goes, but in general you could think of this scenario as the genesis of unbelief. This is not always the process, but generally speaking, it is the natural history of skepticism. If you have carefully observed someone you know drifting into unbelief, you have probably seen something like this occur.”



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Wilberforce perceptively describes the process by which young people walk away from the faith. His hypothetical scenario may not be true for everyone who leaves the faith, but I think his words offer four “timeless” truths concerning those who walk away. Being attentive to these areas can help us as we prepare students for the challenges ahead.

First, students who walk away from the faith succumb to temptations they haven’t faced before. Many students may have been exposed to the temptations of alcohol and sex in high school, but in college, being away from home and parents makes the challenges more difficult to withstand. As one student recently said to me, “I didn’t know it was possible to go to college and *not* drink!” Parents and youth workers must work diligently to remind students of the dangers of alcohol abuse and promiscuous sex, while also casting a better vision for what college can and should be. It is possible to find a caring community on campus that fosters a healthy social life, but it requires intentionality. Help students to make the needed college connections before they head off to college. Visit www.cpyu.org/collegeworkshops to see a listing of ministries available on campuses across the country.

Second, students who walk away from the faith didn’t learn to think. The problem that Wilberforce diagnosed over 200 years ago is still with us today. Many students lack critical thinking skills, failing to take what knowledge is at their disposal to form their own beliefs and convictions. We must continually create space for students to wrestle with the big questions of life. College should not be the first time that students engage in abstract or deep thinking. Critical thinking and Christian discernment are spiritual disciplines that need to be developed. Like anything worthwhile in life, the developmental process takes time and is difficult. A youth group devoted to these activities may not draw the biggest crowds, but if we are serious about preparing students for life after high school, helping students to “learn to think” will be a mark of our ministries.

Third, students who walk away from the faith are consumed with the demands of making a living and the desire for success. It is so easy to get caught up in the world’s definition of success. It’s often difficult to understand how faith relates to day-to-day choices and career decisions. In contemporary American culture, the chief end of man is often expressed as: “He who dies with the most toys wins!” The temptation to live a life

based on material possessions and upward mobility is pervasive, and many students find it too difficult to live a counter-cultural life based on following Jesus. The attitude becomes: "You can't follow Jesus in the 'real world.'" Once again, community is essential to withstand the challenge. College students need to be surrounded by other people who live life differently than the world around them. Teenagers need to be continually exposed to examples of what it looks like to be *in* the world but not *of* it. For Christians, calling is more important than career.

Fourth, students who walk away from the faith see right through the charade of those who profess the faith but don't live the life. It was true in Wilberforce's day, it is true in our day and it will be true until Jesus returns: the problem for most people who walk away from the faith is not Christ, but Christians. Students

who are contemplating leaving the faith are longing not to be around perfect people, but to be around people who are perfectly honest about their own shortcomings and desire to change. Honesty must always trump superficiality.

William Wilberforce reminds us that the problem of students leaving the faith after high school is not new, and the reasons for why students drift away are unlikely to change. Learning from the past can help us in the present to ensure that our ministries are addressing the central challenges students face. If Wilberforce's timeless diagnosis is correct, youth ministries that focus on community, discernment, calling and honesty will prepare students for life after high school.



Derek Melleby is the director of CPYU's College Transition Initiative, coauthor of *Learning for the Love of God: A Student's Guide to Academic Faithfulness* (Brazos Press) and author of *Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning* (Baker Books).

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