

3 Big Lies Leading Today's Youth Into a Pit

We've all seen the videos. High school and college kids who know less about our constitutional form of government than they do about what the Kardashians ate for breakfast that day.

However, the troubling state of our Christian youth is even more serious than a lack of historical or political knowledge. Studies are continuing to confirm that vast swaths of churchgoing kids know little about their Christian faith.

Instead, American Christianity has devolved into what two sociologists called "moralistic therapeutic deism."

In 2005, two sociologists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, dropped a bombshell on the evangelical community titled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (Smith has since moved on to Notre Dame University, where he serves as the director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society; Denton is associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas-San Antonio.)

The pair gleaned their research from two sources, beginning with what was then the largest and most detailed study of teenagers and religion ever undertaken, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). They then added the results of follow-up, face-to-face interviews with more than 250 of the youth who participated in the NSYR study and distilled the results in their riveting book.

The news was not good. What *Soul Searching* revealed was a generation of kids who claimed to be Christian but possessed religious beliefs that were not even remotely orthodox.

Smith and Denton said, "Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith."

What was that colonizing faith? It was tagged by the sociologists with the provocative moniker "moralistic therapeutic deism." Each word presented a core facet of what is becoming the dominant religious view among the nation's youth. (It is also representative of the faith of far too many churchgoing adults, but that's a subject for another blog.)

1. Moralistic

Within the walls of the church, today's "Christian" teen believes faith is essentially related to mere human goodness.

"Most U.S. teens think that one of religion's primary functions is to help people be good," said *Soul Searching*.

Any authentic Bible-believing Christian, however, knows that goodness is neither an inherent human trait nor (even if it were) sufficient for a saving relationship with God.

But that's just the problem. Many church teens simply do not hold to an orthodox Christian belief concerning *anything*.

In a 2015 study published by Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research, researchers surveyed self-professing Christians about their views related to "classic, historic Christian doctrine." In every answer, the study said, "young people between the ages of 18 and 34 consistently held heretical views at a higher percentage than older respondents. Young people who identify themselves as Christians are far more likely to hold views that aren't Christian."

2. Therapeutic

Somewhere along the line, churchgoing kids have missed the point about the Christian faith. Rather than it being a

relationship with God by which a disciple is joined to Christ, follows Him and becomes more and more like Him, the modern, younger evangelical has this view of religion: "It makes me feel happy."

In other words, Christianity—or more properly "church-ianity"—is a religious form of therapy.

According to *Soul Searching*, "[W]hat appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems and getting along amiably with other people."

In their interviews, Smith and Denton said teens rarely mentioned expected phrases when it came to discussing their Christian faith. Concepts like "sin," "obedience," "the kingdom of God," or "the grace of God" were largely absent.

On the other hand, the specific phrase "feel happy" was mentioned more than 2,000 times.

"What our interviews almost never uncovered among teens was a view that religion summons people to embrace an obedience to truth regardless of the personal consequences or rewards," *Soul Searching* said.

(3) Deism

The God of the Bible was also largely absent from the faith of far too many churchgoing kids. Smith and Denton said most teenagers' beliefs about God and their own religious faith were so vague as to be almost incomprehensible.

Their God was "one who exists, created the world and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved," the sociologists noted. "Most of the time, the God of this faith

keeps a safe distance. He is often described by teens as 'watching over everything from above.'"

These kids were not dismissive of their faith, according to *Soul Searching*, and "these were not throwaway comments of teens; these were their main answers to our key questions about their basic personal religious beliefs."

Of course, some parents might be tempted to think, "Well, my teenager can't articulate much of anything at his age."

But Smith and Denton insisted that the problem was not related to their ages. "Many of the youth we interviewed were quite conversant when it came to their views on salient issues in their lives about which they had been educated and had practice discussing, such as the dangers of drug abuse and [sexually transmitted diseases]."

These kids were not stupid, either, as if knowing details of their own faith were somehow beyond their intellectual capacity. "In the end, many teenagers know abundant details about the lives of favorite musicians and television stars or about what it takes to get into a good college, but most are not very clear on who Moses and Jesus were," the researchers noted.

What we are witnessing is a spiritual catastrophe in the making. Those Christians who viewed the recent election as a reprieve are probably right. But it was not a permanent end to the spiritual war engulfing our nation. If we are not careful, and if we don't change the way we do business within the four walls of American church life, it won't matter what happens outside them. {eo}

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