

# Listening To Young Atheists

**Introduction.** Have you ever wondered what leads people to become atheists? Atheists are people who are not merely irreligious; they are actively, determinedly irreligious. One would usually expect atheists to attribute their decision to the purely rational and objective: their understanding of science, their exploration of the reasonableness of specific religions, etc. To gain some insight, Larry Taunton, executive director of the Fixed Point Foundation, launched a nationwide campaign to interview college students who are atheists, and what these young people had to say startled the researchers.

One of the young men they interviewed was Phil. He was once the president of his Methodist church's youth group. He loved his church, his preacher, and, most of all, his youth leader, Jim. But during his junior year of high school, the church, in an effort to attract more young people, wanted Jim to teach less and play more. "Church became all about ceremony, handholding, and kumbaya," Phil said. Differences of opinion over this new direction meant Jim was replaced by Savannah, an energetic twenty-something who, according to Phil, "didn't know a thing about the Bible." The church got what it wanted: the youth group grew. But it lost Phil.

Phil's story was typical of the stories the researchers would hear from students across the country. Slowly, a composite sketch of American, college-aged atheists began to emerge and it will help us to think about the answers they gave as to why they became atheists.

## I. ***The Mission And Message Of Their Churches Was Vague***

- A. Most of the participants had not chosen their worldview from philosophically neutral positions void of emotion at all, but in reaction to the gospel -- not Islam or Buddhism -- the gospel.
- B. These students heard plenty of messages encouraging "social justice," community involvement, and "being good," but they seldom saw the relationship between that message, Jesus Christ, and the Bible. Stephanie, a student at Northwestern, said, "The connection between Jesus and a person's life was not clear."
- C. She intuitively understood that the church does not exist simply to address social ills, but to proclaim the teachings of its founder, Jesus Christ, and their relevance to the world. Since Stephanie did not see that connection, she saw little incentive to stay. Unfortunately, the researchers heard this over and over.
- D. Paul preached Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 4:5). The true church of Christ is going to reprove, correct, and instruct in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 4:2). A faithful congregation is going to have a laser focus on the simple work of the

church: evangelism (Philippians 1:3-5; 4:14-16), edification (Ephesians 4:14-15; Hebrews 10:24), and benevolence for the saints (Acts 2:44-45; 11:27-29). The church does not have a vague mission, nor does it have a mission that promotes politics or advances social issues.

## II. ***They Felt Their Churches Offered Superficial Answers To Life's Difficult Questions***

- A. When the participants were asked what they found unconvincing about the gospel, they spoke of evolution vs. creation, sexuality, the reliability of the biblical text, Jesus as the only way, etc. Some had attended church assemblies hoping to find answers to these questions. Others wanted answers to deeply personal questions of purpose and ethics.
- B. Serious-minded, they often concluded that worship assemblies were largely shallow, harmless, and ultimately irrelevant. As Ben, an engineering major at the University of Texas, so bluntly put it: "I really started to get bored with church."
- C. The Bible tells man how to interpret the physical world in which he lives. Were it not for the scriptures, man forever would be forced to ask -- yet never be competent to answer -- deep questions as, "From where have I come?" or "Why am I here?" or "Where am I going?" Solomon, after having become convinced of the vanity of life (Ecclesiastes 2:17-23), concluded that man must obey the will of God (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

## III. ***They Expressed Their Respect For Christians Who Took The Bible Seriously***

- A. Without fail, the former church-attending students expressed respect for those Christians who unashamedly embraced biblical teaching. Michael, a political science major at Dartmouth, told us that he is drawn to Christians like that, adding: "I really can't consider a Christian a good, moral person if he isn't trying to convert me."
- B. Surprisingly, this sentiment is not as unusual as you might think. Penn Jillette, the atheist illusionist and comedian, said, "I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward ... How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"
- C. Comments like these should cause every Christian to examine their conscience to see if they truly believe that Jesus is the only way to

God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Furthermore, do we take it seriously enough to convert others (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; cp. 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Revelation 14:6)?

#### IV. ***Ages 14-17 Were Decisive***

- A. One participant said that she considered herself an atheist by the age of eight while another said that he de-converted during his sophomore year of college, but these were the outliers. For most, the high school years were the time when they embraced unbelief.
- B. Children will only remember their Creator in the days of their youth if we help them and point the way (Ecclesiastes 12:1). This means they need to see consistent godliness among the members (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:5), and the absolute necessity of teaching them, both at home and in Bible classes (Acts 20:27, 31-32).

**Conclusion.** Children can be saved and prevented from leaving the faith. The way to do it is not with worldly wisdom, but with adherence to the pure gospel.

It is sad that these students longed for truth, and having failed to find it in their churches, they settled for a non-belief that felt more genuine and attainable. I again quote Michael: "Christianity is something that if you really believed it, it would change your life and you would want to change [the lives] of others. I haven't seen too much of that" (cp. Matthew 22:37; Romans 12:1). There is something appealing, even irresistible, about a life lived with conviction.