

Effective Evangelism: JAE361

## REACHING POSTMODERN "LEAVERS"

by Drew Dyck

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My friend Abe was raised as a Christian, but abandoned his faith during college. "I don't know what happened," he said with a shrug. "I just left it."

When I heard about Abe's "deconversion," my mind jumped to the last time I'd seen him. It was at a Promise Keepers rally the year after we graduated from high school. I remember being surprised to see him there; neither of us had been strong Christians in school. But watching him standing next to his father in the Coliseum, it was clear something had clicked. As the voices of twenty thousand men lifted in unison, Abe squeezed his eyes shut and extended one slender arm skyward. He seemed solemn yet peaceful, totally absorbed in God's presence.

I'd considered myself a Christian since childhood. Yet it wasn't until my late teens, when I carefully read the Gospels, that the faith truly became my own.

When I saw Abe worshipping at the rally, I assumed he had undergone a similar transformation. We were both pastors' kids. We had both gone through the proverbial rebellious phase, but that didn't mean we didn't believe. That's why I was shocked by his decision to leave the faith. I was a little curious, too. What had prompted Abe, who was my age, and from a remarkably similar background, to defect?

**"I Felt Nothing."** Fast forward six years from that Promise Keepers rally and Abe is sitting in my studio apartment, slapping a cigarette from a pack of American Spirits. The intervening years had taken us each down very different paths. I was married. He was single. I was headed to seminary. He was wrapping up law school. I was an active Christian. He'd rejected the faith. At the time of his visit, he was celebrating a last stint of student life freedom by motorbiking across the country. I offered him my futon when he rolled into town. It wasn't much, but compared to the nights he'd been spending in his pop-up tent, it probably felt like the Marriott.

We talked late into the night. Since high school he'd lived an exciting and eclectic life. I felt a twinge of jealousy as he described experiences that seemed lifted from a Jack Kerouac novel. He'd lived in London, England, and worked as a bartender. He'd backpacked through India. He'd spent summers tree planting in northern Alberta, a

lucrative seasonal gig that funded his nomadic existence. Somewhere in Asia he suspended his travels to meditate in a Buddhist monastery. He'd become a vegetarian.

His experiences had changed him—most significantly in his views about God. When I broached the subject, his voice grew quiet.

“When I left the faith, I thought it would feel really bad. I assumed I'd come right back. But I didn't feel bad. I felt nothing.”

Though he was philosophical about his departure, he didn't regret it. In fact, he felt liberated. And he was slightly combative. “Can you honestly say that Christianity has been good for humanity?” he asked.

If I had been saddened by Abe's decision, his father was devastated. When he heard about it, he rushed Abe the book *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, hoping it might bring him back. It didn't. Abe read the book, even enjoyed it, but didn't change his decision to bid his faith farewell.

“Growing up I had an uncle that wasn't a Christian and we prayed for him all the time,” Abe said wistfully. “They probably pray for me like that now.”

When I dove into my best apologetics, Abe shrugged. “I don't really believe in all that rationality,” he said. “Reason and logic come from the Western philosophical tradition. I don't think that's the only way to find truth.”

His response silenced me. How could I reason with someone who didn't believe in reason?

**Shifting Ground.** In his book *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age*, Brad Kallenberg recounts his decade-long stint as a college campus evangelist. When he started in the late 1970s, conversion rates were high. Kallenberg recalls that about 10 percent of gospel presentations resulted in conversion. But by 1985, the rate had slipped to about 6 or 7 percent—this despite the fact that Kallenberg and fellow evangelists were working twice as hard to make the gospel intelligible to students who were increasingly illiterate biblically.

Disheartened by the dwindling numbers, they switched tactics, investing money in huge on-campus advertising campaigns to generate a “warm market” of students. Despite such efforts, numbers continued to fall. Shortly after Kallenberg's departure from the ministry in 1989, the percentage of conversions fell to an abysmal 2 percent. All along, Kallenberg and the other campus evangelists were sharing the same message. The results, however, were changing dramatically. So what was happening? For Kallenberg, the mystery cleared when he enrolled in graduate school and began studying philosophy. A major shift had taken place in the field, he discovered, that was now beginning to affect the culture. Suddenly Kallenberg understood why it felt like the “ground was shifting under (his) feet.” The old ways of thinking were crumbling, and Christian faith was regarded differently in the new milieu. Kallenberg didn't realize it right away, but he was experiencing the impact of what we commonly call postmodernism.

**The Postmodern Terrain.** The most succinct definition of postmodernism probably comes from the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who famously defined it as “incredulity toward meta-narratives.” What does that mean? Basically that those big stories—the kind of overarching narratives by which we define reality—are regarded with suspicion. In a postmodern world, no one story is large enough to contain the whole of reality, much less define it for all people.

With no standard narrative to serve as a guide, reality is determined by individual experience. According to philosopher J. P. Moreland, “On a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective truth, reality, value, reason, and so forth.”

As I read this definition, Abe’s words echoed in my ears. “I don’t believe in all that rationality.... I don’t think that’s the only way to find truth.” The postmodernist view holds that there is a different “truth” for each person. And experience—not rationality—is the key to finding that truth.

Another precept of postmodernism is more positive: concern for the marginalized. That’s one problem postmodern thinkers have with metanarratives, or big stories—they tend to neglect the “little people.” Talk to postmodern thinkers about the wisdom of the Greeks, and they’ll remind you that the Greeks held slaves and subjugated women. Talk about the Founding Fathers, and they’ll talk about the cruel treatment of the natives. Christian faith comes under fire, too. For many postmodern thinkers, the historical horrors of the Crusades and Inquisition cast a pall over the gospel message. As Abe pointed to examples of Christians that he felt were indifferent to the poor and marginalized, he was voicing one of the central tenets of postmodern thought.

**Talking to Postmodern Leavers.** I wish I could finish Abe’s story with a climactic tale of return, or at least report that he agreed to re-examine the faith. Unfortunately, the most I can say at this point is that Abe is still on a journey. Yet I was encouraged (and surprised) by a comment he made toward the end of our discussion. In true postmodern fashion, he mused, “Who knows? Maybe I’ll come back [to faith] some day.”

Trying to reach leavers with a postmodern worldview can be frustrating. They’re not interested in philosophical proofs for God’s existence or in the case for the resurrection. Your best defenses of the faith seem to fall on deaf ears, or worse yet, make them even more resistant to your message.

What follows are some tips I’ve discovered—often by falling flat on my face!—about how to speak meaningfully to this tough-to-reach group of young adults.

**1. Tell Your Story.** In a postmodern world, metanarratives are suspect, but personal perspectives are sacrosanct. Whatever you experience or feel deeply will be respected. You are authorized to tell your story. T. V. Thomas, a Malaysian-born evangelist who speaks on university campuses all over the world, told me, “Young people might say, ‘Don’t tell me anything about Christianity.’ But they don’t mind you telling them your story, because it’s your story.”

Resist the urge to edit the story to make it clean and tidy. Be honest with them about your struggles, even your doubts. In the end they'll respond more favorably if they can see that you're not so different from them.

**2. Build Trust.** C. S. Lewis's style of apologetics may not resonate with a postmodern generation. But when it comes to interacting with those who leave the faith, the Oxford don offers some sage advice: "A person must court a virgin differently than a divorcée," said Lewis. "One welcomes the charming words; the other needs a demonstration of love to overcome inbuilt skepticism."

As I've spoken with postmodern leavers, the issue of trust came up repeatedly. "They just want to preach at me," they would say of Christians. Befriend them unconditionally. Show genuine interest and love. Only once they trust you and believe you love them unconditionally will they warm to your message.

**3. Invite Them to Serve.** Postmoderns have a strong social conscience and a willingness to serve. By inviting them to serve with you and other Christians, you provide a natural access point to the church and allow them to participate in the work of God in the world. Traditional evangelism has required belief before belonging, but there's no reason why that order can't be reversed. Jesus Himself extended the simple invitation to his disciples, "Follow me," knowing that the full truth of His identity would be revealed only as they walked beside Him. We'd be wise to do the same. Inviting postmoderns to participate in acts of service often marks the beginning of a journey that leads to a new life in Christ.

**4. Follow the Leader.** Of course there was someone who did all these things quite well—Jesus! He earned people's trust through service and sacrifice. He invited people to serve alongside Him. He preferred colorful stories over linear arguments to sketch a compelling picture of the kingdom. We'd do well to surrender our often clunky and predictable methods to follow Him, moving from soul to soul, whetting spiritual appetites, speaking the lost language of spiritual longing, challenging, probing, provoking, baffling. It's not an easy act to follow. But it's worth it. As we follow Jesus in this way, we'll be surprised at how many postmodern leavers join us on the journey.

—Drew Dyck

**Drew Dyck** is a managing editor at *Christianity Today* and holds an M.A. in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. This article is excerpted from his book *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith and How to Bring Them Back* (Moody, 2010).