

A Prayer for Alex: What to do when your child says he doesn't believe any more.

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A friend stopped in to ask me some questions about her 6th grade son's sudden announcement that he no longer believed in God or Jesus. Our time was simply too short for a substantial answer, so I thought it would be a good topic for an essay. Probably others are facing similar struggles with your own children. There are thousands of "Alexes" out there, and thousands of agonized, surprised parents. I hope this is helpful. Feel free to write me with your thoughts.

Dear Doc and Leanne,

I appreciated the opportunity to talk about Alex, and I am glad that our friendship is such that we can share one another's burdens. I can feel your concern about your son, and I join you in that concern. The faith journey of our children is something we all feel responsible for, and even though we know we can't "make" things happen, we hear a lot in scripture about what parents should do. We are commanded to raise up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We're told that if we raise up a child in the right way, when he is old, he will not depart from it. But then there is the real world, where things aren't that simple, and our middle school age sons tell us they no longer believe in God, despite our faith, prayers and efforts. So what can I say that would be helpful?

For starters, I think we generally have bought into an evangelical fantasy about where young people ought to be in their faith journey, and we all want our kids to be part of this fantasy, even if it is, well...ridiculous, or at least far from reality. These are the kinds of fantasies where middle school and high school young people are already "mature Christians," "excited for Jesus," "witnessing to their friends," and, of course, immune from the various peer pressures and social corruptions common in American culture.

Last year, for instance, a "Kids for Christ" ministry team came to church with a band and other creative ministries, all led by kids middle school age and below. The parents played managers and roadies, and spent the rest of the time beaming with pride, as well they should. I commend them for being involved with their kids and making it possible for those young people to put their faith "out there" in the world. But I would warn those same parents to be cautious. Experience has taught me, and many others, that the faith journey is often one with many unusual turns and twists along the way. Those who were once excited young Christians may turn out to be committed unbelievers, while the kids that looked like they couldn't care less about God often wind up being your pastor. (I remember when my friend Richard, a Presbyterian pastor, spoke at chapel and talked about being expelled from OBI. I remember well how he laughed at my faith right up to our senior year, and then was soundly converted out of the clear blue!)

We would all love for our children to be part of that ministry team, but most of all, I want my children to have a serious and true faith. I don't want their faith to be entirely the result of bribery, peer pressure, acquiescence and parental acceptance. I am not saying children's ministries like the one which visited us are the results of those influences. I am saying that experience proves it is quite possible to influence young people's behavior, without seeing a real heart change or faith commitment.

Evangelical Christians, who believe in conversion, usually also believe in the nurture of children in faith from birth on. Few churches treat their children of believers as rank Philistines, even if their theology says that is exactly what they believe. Child Dedication services give evidence that we believe there is a shepherding, growing, nurturing process at work, and such a process is long term, and can't be a matter of betting everything on what a child says or does in any one phase of their growth. If we are really committed to nurturing our children in this journey, then we accept that there will be diverse seasons and varying terrain. In order to grow, our children may adopt what appears to be a hostile stance toward what has come before. We need to be more committed to the process than to give up or panic at the first sign of trouble. We may, in fact, be close to significant growth.

Middle school boys usually go through a period of rejecting the "Sunday School" version of their childhood faith. If we are honest, most of us will admit that we probably can't stay entirely "ahead of the game" when it comes to the influences on our children. As they grow, they are going to see some of their previous commitments as "childish," and we will see them throw that part of their world overboard, sometimes with a loud announcement. This is especially true, I've found, in the early middle school grades, with boys who are smart, aware of the larger world, and sensitive to what is "normal" for older boys. Religion, in general, doesn't do well at that age. Even among choir boys.

What happens? Normal things. The young man begins to be aware of what other teenagers are thinking and doing. He picks up signals from the world of science and from the larger culture. If he is normal (and parents aren't exerting unusual control over media), he is listening to music, watching TV and viewing movies- all of which introduce him to a larger and more "cool" world than the world of the fourth and fifth grader. And in this world where teenagers seem to know everything, the messages about God are heavily biased against the religion of his childhood. It will not be unusual for the young man to pick rejection of religion as one way to become an independent individual, thinking and choosing for himself, and seeing himself as grown up.

Is this a disaster? I don't really think so. My friends who work diligently to avoid this are often buying a lot of stock in something that we ought not to be encouraging: conformity to the values of family without choosing those values in the open market. (I know I am going to hear from some readers that we ought to protect children from choices that they aren't ready to make. All I can say is you need to take a class in human development. And stay awake when the teacher is discussing what is happening in middle school.) In other words, some families want a monopoly because they are certain they can't win their child's heart and mind if he knows what is over the fence and beyond the road.

The implications of this view are serious. It is pessimistic, and it encourages a kind of immaturity that I don't want to encourage. That isn't to say that a child must start taking in MTV asap in order to make a choice, but, on the other hand, is it right that a child watch no TV so they are not even aware there is a choice? Why are we so convinced that an adolescent rejection of religion is to be avoided at all costs? I would far prefer to deal with the possibility of rejection early on than later, when a college age or young adult child decides to abandon Christ with true finality, fueled by resentment and a sense of being confined in a failed effort to produce an unsullied, and unchosen, Christianity.

Further, this adolescent rejection may be, in fact, a necessary prelude to significant growth. Such a rejection may be painful to hear, but it shows a mind at work. Questions are being asked. A worldview is being formed. Yes, that worldview has concluded that a God who can't be seen and who isn't accepted by lots of smart, cool people is a fairy tale to be dismissed. But how far do we want to go with childish notions of God and childish answers? These questions, and this early rejection, really put parents in the position of a serious effort at bringing the young person to the place of trust. Christ isn't the answer to every scientific objection or skeptical excuse. He is God incarnate. He asks for our trust. He is a savior of sinners. To come to the place of trusting Christ, we often must see the inadequacy of our own answers and the bankruptcy of the idea of others. In order to believe, we often must disbelieve...and then see faith in a new light.

So what to do in the meantime? How do you respond? Let's move to some more practical answers to your situation.

Alex is looking for some reaction. You can be sure of that. He may hope that this will rid him of any participation in your family's spiritual beliefs and practices. Of course, this shouldn't be the case. Make it clear to him that, no matter where he is personally, your family's values won't be changing. Whatever have been your spiritual practices, these will continue and with his respectful participation. When he has his own family, he may do what he wants. Your family will worship, pray, etc.

Don't overreact emotionally, and don't act as if his objections are stupid or immoral. In fact, be cautious about any approach to the issues he will say are bothering him. Some may be useful for discussion, while others will be a waste of everyone's time.

For instance, if he thinks evolution eliminates Christianity, enlighten him. If he believes that a God that doesn't answer him verbally, isn't real, help him examine his thinking. If he is convinced that no one smart or cool believes in God, correct his errant notions. But if he wants to argue Bible difficulties like where did Cain get his wife, be cautious. If he has unbelieving heroes, don't demonize them. The answer here won't be as simple as giving stock responses to Bible difficulties or saying Blink 182 is of the devil. Faith is commendable because of Jesus, not because of apologetics. Answers are great. Exposure to the reality of Christ is better. We need Christ in this situation, and not just the Christ we've talked about. Our children need a Christ who is experienced and real.

I have four practical suggestions for where you are with Alex right now. I'm sure you could think of them yourself, but my time working with students has underlined these things as very important with middle school boys who are rejecting the faith.

1. Every summer, send him to a great Christian camp, or similar experiences. I know this sounds simplistic, but in the big picture, I would mark this as a very significant and effective response.

Why? Peer pressure works both ways. Camp surrounds a student with older kids who are committed to the faith and who present a model of being normal and "cool" that appeals to every young person I've known. The positive peer pressure of camp generally helps the student to rethink their decision with a more open mind, and with consideration to how others have handled similar questions. Good conversations usually occur with older youth. Friendship and bonds are formed that make the faith more than an intellectual experience. Camp, or similar experiences, have been very helpful for young men like Alex. I would highly recommend finding a church youth group that can include Alex in such an activity.

Why didn't I say just join a youth group? Because that isn't the answer. I've seen hundreds of pagan kids in youth groups. Many youth groups are full of the same skepticism that Alex has adopted, and their focus on activities doesn't help. I think intelligent young people are a lot less reachable with pizza and stupid human tricks than most youth pastors expect. Some youth groups would be great. Others would be counter productive. Be cautious. I would personally go another route we'll discuss below, and then send Alex and a friend to a quality camp like the [The Cove](#).

2. Take your family to a church that presents the faith- and especially the Gospel- in simple, positive, understandable ways. You won't be surprised to hear me say that every church doesn't help you deal with a young person like Alex. Many trust the "youth program" to do the foundational work. This is a critical error. Church should be a family event, not an age-grouped event. Alex needs to hear the Gospel, even if he is bored with it and doesn't believe it. He needs to hear the Gospel and nothing else. He doesn't need a lot of manipulation or emotion. He needs to hear about Jesus Christ, the savior of sinners. He needs to hear it over and over, plainly and simply. I can't say this enough: find a church that is Gospel centered and go there regularly. If Alex is going to reject the idea of God and the message of Jesus, let's be sure he's hearing it so there is no confusion.

Now there are some who won't like what I am going to say next, but it is critical. Alex needs to understand that a belief in evolution doesn't eliminate the Gospel. There are Christians who- rightly or wrongly- believe in various versions of evolution, and are still Christians. Christianity isn't about politics, tacky Christian music or television evangelists on TBN. Being a Christian isn't being a preacher or an angry anti-gay protester. It's not being like your parents or your pastor. It's not promising to be like the weirdo Christians at your Christian school, be they teachers or students. Christianity is about Christ. Jesus. Who he is, what he did, what it means. It's the announcement that Jesus lived, died, was raised and is now Lord of all. Alex needs to hear this till he is totally clear that the ONLY thing that matters in his rejection of Christianity is Jesus. The rest you can throw overboard any time you want.

I don't really care what denomination you have to go to to make this change, but do it. Don't be hung up on loyalty in a matter this important. If your church is preaching moralism, or expounding Ezra or making the Gospel anything less than crystal clear, leave. Don't stay for the music or your extended family. The Gospel matters and the clock is ticking. This isn't something that can be anything less than a priority. If Alex is going to reject God and Jesus Christ, then it should be exactly those persons, and nothing else, that he is rejecting. And if he is going to believe, he needs to hear the simplicity and straightforward invitation to believe in those same persons in the clearest, most understandably Christian way.

3. Examine how faith works in your own home, and make any changes that need to be made. This sounds personal, and it is. The greatest influence on a child's faith- now and in the years to come- will be the faith and practice of parents.

Evangelical parents tend to either do too little or too much in making their own faith part of their family. I'm fairly convinced that a middle way is where we need to go. What does that look like?

- *God is clearly part of how all important decisions are made.*
- *Prayer is common, but no one is forced to pray.*
- *Christian special days are celebrated modestly.*
- *Devotional life is there to be observed and joined in.*
- *The children will learn the basic message and story of the Bible.*
- *Sunday worship isn't an option while you live with the family.*
- *Respect for the God, for Jesus, for sincere Christians and the Christian faith will always be expected.*
- *Ministry to other people, especially those who are suffering, is part of family life.*
- *Spiritual things are part of family discussions, particularly where culture and faith might be in conflict.*
- *Children aren't overly sheltered, but parents are willing to relate the truth of the Gospel to whatever children might see or hear.*
- *Christian moral and ethical choices are a priority.*
- *Loving God and Loving neighbor are the foundations of what parents want for their children.*

What would I avoid? I would avoid attempting to force faith into the life of a child beyond the basic commitments of the family. In other words, Alex will need to see that this is a Christian marriage and family, and his stance at any moment doesn't change the commitments and identity of your family. But you won't be forcing Alex to become a Christian or prove that he believes what he doesn't believe. He is free to believe as he chooses, and he is still loved and accepted as part of the family.

Declaring a "three alarm fire" over an unbelieving child is, in my opinion, a mistake. How you feel needs to be personally expressed, but in terms that help Alex to see this is an acceptable part of the human journey of growing up, even if it makes you sad. Tell him about Christians who went through times of rejecting the faith they were taught about as children. Share with him how you identify with some of what he is feeling. But above all, show him the love of Jesus, who consistently loved and showed compassion for those who did not "believe."

Don't let Alex's rebellion have a "pay off" in getting negative attention. Do all you can to avoid arguments, and help him see that Christians don't reject unbelievers. At the same time, make it clear that the direction of your family isn't determined by the children, but by the parents.

If there are areas where the practice of the faith in your family may have made it easier for Alex to reject the faith, directly address those. Apologize to him if you have failed to be the Christian examples or nurturers you should have been. Remember that God makes great demands on parents, but he is also the same gracious God to Christian parents that he is to prodigal son. I have no doubt that the father did some soul-searching as he waited for his son to come home. A "wayward" child may become an instrument for the Spirit to bring renewal and growth to parents and the family. Open your hearts to this possibility, and be certain that I am always available to talk with you about this journey called Christian parenting.

4. Pray for Alex, no matter what he says he believes or doesn't believe. This seems quite expected, but I think it is probably the most important thing you can do. God gave this child to a Christian family for a purpose. I always operate on the assumption that one of those purposes was that the child would come to know and trust Jesus Christ. I know there are many unbelievers from Christian families, but I also know that the scriptures are full of marvelous promises for Christian families. I will stand on those promises, and the way to stand is to pray those promises.

John Piper talks about learning to read the "new covenant" promises of God and turn them into prayers for those who don't believe. (One of Dr. Piper's sons went "prodigal" for several years, so he isn't just talking here.) In [a sermon from 1986](#), Piper gave specific examples of New Covenant praying.

Paul leaves no doubt where he stands on that issue in [Romans 9:16](#), "It depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." So he prays that God would convert Israel! He prays for her salvation! He does not pray for ineffectual influences, but for effectual influences. And that is how we should pray too.

We should take the new covenant promises of God and plead with God to bring them to pass in Israel and in the full number of the Gentiles and especially in the individuals in our own circle of acquaintance.

"God, take out of their flesh the heart of stone and give them a new heart flesh" ([Ezekiel 11:19](#)).

"Lord, circumcise their heart so that they love you" ([Deuteronomy 30:6](#)).

"Father, put your Spirit within them and cause them to walk in your statutes" ([Ezekiel 36:27](#)).

"Lord, grant them repentance and a knowledge of the truth that they may escape from the snare of the devil" ([2 Timothy 2:25-26](#)).

"Father, open their eyes so that they believe to the Gospel" ([Acts 16:14](#)).

“God, crucify the mind of the flesh that is unwilling to submit to your law that the mind of the Spirit might rule unto life” ([Romans 8:7-8](#)).

In other words, we should say, “Father, my heart’s desire and prayer to you is that you would SAVE them.”

Most Christians don’t pray this way because their theology takes away the sovereignty of God in salvation. I can’t say what a disaster this is for the Christian parent. We are told to boldly pray for God to do what only God can do. While I don’t agree with everything in the book, Douglas Wilson does a great job sharing the promises God makes to parents in his book “[Standing on the Promises](#).” If nothing else, a survey of the promises of God to parents will provide great material for prayer and a strong sense that God intends to bless our children. Stormie Omartian has much of this same material in her book “[The Power of a Praying Parent](#).” It is worth getting resources that convince us of the promises God gives us to pray for our kids. The assurance of these promises are beyond price in the tough times.

Of course, our role is to keep praying. Throughout our child’s life. We can’t pray in a way that stops our child from having their own thoughts and decisions, but we can pray the promises of God for that child throughout life. We have no idea when or how God is going to work. We have no idea how far down they will go before they see the truth. We do not know the road God will allow them to walk, why God chooses that road, or how long they will be on it. But we can pray, and we must pray.

I know this is a difficult turn in the road. No one wants their sixth grade child, a child who has heard about God and Jesus every day, to say they don’t believe. But this is the reality. What we must keep in mind is God’s bigger picture and purposes. At Alex’s age, I was an atheist. I remained so until my sophomore year of high school. Today, I am approaching my 33rd year as a Christian. Who can understand the ways of the Lord? I am simply glad for a faithful church, praying parents and a merciful God.

Trust in the Lord, and call upon him in the time of trouble. He will hear and answer, and you will have reason to praise him. I’m confident that God has a plan and a purpose for this season of Alex’s life. Let’s see it through.