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## Many evangelical watchdogs are sounding alarms concerning a disappointing type of college dropout: those dropping out of the Christian faith the moment they hit their university campuses.

“Dropping out” of the Christian faith raises all kinds of theological questions, so I will begin by affirming that I have a strong personal conviction about the doctrine of eternal security. I believe that born-again person can never be lost or un-born, and I respect my Christian brothers and sisters who see it differently.

But here’s the point: many students arrive on college campuses each year only to walk away from the very faith that once gave them guidance. While many will return to church involvement later in life, even a temporary hiatus can involve grave earthly consequences related to their future hopes and dreams. How can we help nurture a faith that remains strong even in the face of the pressures of college and young adult life?

### **Be theologically rich in your teaching ministry.**

I am surprised at the way I often underestimate the capacity of students to comprehend and apply deep truths of Scripture. With ready-made resources offering to supplement our supposed lack of time for prep and study, we are tempted to allow the canned resources to replace our pursuit of study, meditation, and reflection on the Scriptures. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve thanked God more than once for resources like the one you’re reading now when I’m pressed for time or need something cool for supplement. But, a shepherd cannot guide the flock of God to places where he or she has never been.

Theological richness stems from your personal growth with God. Are you growing in both your cerebral AND experiential understanding of God? Students can sense when you’re talking from personal passion and experience versus having read someone’s idea out of a book. Even when you use some of the great pre-written material available, your ambition should be to make it your own. Wrestle with it, think through it, and tweak it until you believe what you’re teaching and are ready to live it out.

### **Be honest about your own struggles with doubt.**

We’ve communicated to students that “doubt” is the enemy of faith. However, I believe that apathy is the real enemy of faith. Giving up is what quenches the fire of faith. Sharing openly about the questions you’ve struggled with and how you came to various resolutions can go a long way in assuring students that true faith is not the opposite of doubt – but the opposite of apathy. When a student becomes confused and then ceases to care and gives up, he or she is a prime target for believing a false message. That message may come in the form of secular humanistic philosophy or a false religious system or something else – but come it will – and students need to know how to let doubt become a friend to their faith instead of a foe that leads to apathy.

Just this morning my wife and I awoke to one of the best text messages we could ever have received. It simply read: *“Sunday the 4th of January, I accept Jesus Christ as my savior. I ask him to be a part of my life and in my heart – Mary.”* The reason for our joy is obvious, but even more so when you know something of Mary’s story. My wife has been Mary’s small group leader for two years. Mary comes to our youth gatherings regularly and is someone to whom faith has not come easy. She is a skeptic, a doubter, and someone we’ve consistently loved and shared the Gospel with since we met her. She always told us how she felt ashamed to come to God because of her doubt.

When my wife explained that God is not afraid of her honesty, but rather pleased by it, and that Jesus prioritized the object of faith (Himself) over the amount of faith (i.e. the mustard seed parable), Mary began to take baby steps. She now realizes that, like Thomas, God won’t reject her as she wrestles with questions.

### **Realize that apologetics is still important – but also changing.**

I am a natural skeptic, and early on God used the writings of many classic apologists from C.S. Lewis to Francis Schaeffer to Josh McDowell to help solidify my faith. But in addition to evidential apologetics we need to engage in experiential apologetics. Students need to know not only that Christianity is true – but also that it works.

It works when it’s keeping us from sin and its consequences. And it works when we fall into sin and face its consequences. It works to bring peace among enemies and it works to bring peace in the soul. It works in being realistic about the present and it works to bring hope regarding the future. It works to rescue the soul from the grip of Hades and it works to rescue the body from the grip of poverty. As theology moves from the classroom to the laboratory – as kids have the opportunity to both witness and participate in the “living out” of faith – they are much more likely to embrace Jesus as the holistic answer to all life’s complexities and not simply view him as a “Get out of hell free” card (as important as that is).

### **Partner with Parents.**

I am amazed at how many youth workers want little or nothing to do with parents. This is one of the great scandals of modern youth ministry. Even non-believing parents want their kids to be solid, healthy, productive members of society. Make your priority to be even MORE available to parents than you are to students. When they walk into the room, acknowledge them. Invite their involvement in any way possible or appropriate. Offer gatherings and training for them. Talk to them about specific struggles they face in the raising of their kids. This will not only earn you much credibility in their eyes, but will keep your finger on the pulse of the home life, enabling you to minister with greater wisdom and sensitivity.

John was a likeable kid who I wished would sign up for one of our camps – but he never would. He was friendly, quirky, and a bit immature for his age – but very loveable. Finally, after getting to know John’s dad over a cup of coffee, I was made aware that John’s biological mother had severely abused him as a younger child. Because of this background, John struggled with a few behavioral difficulties that made his dad nervous about sending him away overnight. My new compassion for John and his dad led me to arrange for a handful of male leaders to be brought into the inner circle of awareness so that they could effectively monitor and minister to John – and next month, as a senior in high school, he will be heading to winter camp with us for the very first time!

So be encouraged! You ARE making a difference! That appointment you recently squeezed in to make time for somebody; that extra ten minutes you spent to pray with that student; that late night conversation after they had blown it, it’s all working to remind your students that Christianity is not only true – it works.