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Beyond Belief to Convictions

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Interior designed by Dean H. Renninger

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McDowell, Josh.

Beyond belief to convictions / Josh D. McDowell, Bob Hostetler.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8423-8009-4 (hc)—ISBN 0-8423-7409-4 (sc)

1. Apologetics. 2. Postmodernism—Religious aspects—Christianity.

I. Hostetler, Bob, date II. Title.

BT1103 .M33 2002

239—dc21

2002006066

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 02
8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHAPTER 1

A Crisis of Beliefs

As the three Christian leaders gathered before dawn in a place they thought to be secret, their prayer time together was interrupted by the sounds of crashing and shouting. The authorities had made repeated efforts to persuade the believers to recant their loyalty to Jesus Christ . . . and had failed. But this time there were no discussions. In seconds, the Christians were surrounded by a cadre of Roman soldiers, lifted to their feet, shackled, and led away to an unknown destination.

After several anxious hours of imprisonment, the Christians were brought out before a raucous crowd in the arena of the Colosseum. Their eyes scanned the stadium, blinking away disbelief at the thousands of eager thrill seekers awaiting the spectacle of a grisly execution.

Still in chains, the group stood before the proconsul, who ordered them to renounce their faith in Jesus, God's Son.

"Swear that Caesar is Lord," the proconsul demanded. "Renounce your false beliefs, and I will release you." He added a warning. "Fail to swear the oath, and you will face the lions."

One among the followers of Christ stepped forward. "I have com-

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mitted my life to Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God," he said. "If he wills that I die today, so be it. But I cannot renounce him."

"Nor can I," spoke the second man in a loud voice.

"I will serve only Christ," said the last.

The proconsul hesitated only a moment before lifting his hand with a flourish. "Then you have made your choice," he said. He nodded his head, and the soldiers opened the gates. The crowd erupted in a bloodthirsty frenzy as the lions appeared in the arena and focused their hungry gazes on their prey.

DANGERS IN A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY COLOSSEUM

The rolls of history are filled with the names and accounts of Christians who, like the men described above, stood strong for their beliefs in Jesus Christ—even in the face of torture and execution. They chose death for what they believed rather than renounce their firm faith in the one true God.

In many ways, our young people today must endure a twenty-first-century Colosseum. They may not face literal lions, but they quite possibly encounter more ethical and moral temptations, greater spiritual battles and more intense emotional and relational struggles than any other generation in history. I know that your prayer—like mine—is that our kids will be strong in spirit and character, able to resist the pressures of a godless culture so that no matter what happens, they can live lives we can be proud of—lives that are pleasing to God and others. We want them to become "mature and full grown in the Lord," as the apostle Paul said, so that they "will no longer be like children, forever changing [their] minds about what [they] believe because someone has told [them] something different or because someone has cleverly lied to [them] and made the lie sound like the truth" (Ephesians 4:13-14).

But we worry that the values we are trying to instill within our children will be countered somehow. What strikes fear in our hearts is the possibility that our young people will fall prey to the wrong crowd, succumb to the cultural pressures, and make wrong choices that will bring pain and suffering to their lives. We're concerned that all the warnings, cautions, and biblical teachings we offer our children won't be enough to ground them and keep them standing strong. And we have ample reason for alarm.

WHY BELIEFS MATTER

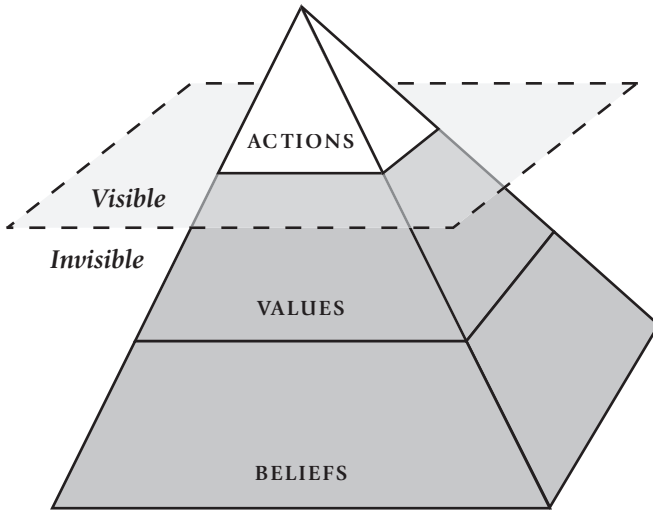
I don't need to alarm you by quoting statistics that indicate what our kids are doing. If you're a parent, pastor, youth worker, educator, or anyone interested in today's young people, you see what's happening; you sense the danger. Our children today face unprecedented pressure. They are exposed to sexual temptation, school violence, alcohol, illegal drugs, and a variety of influences that threaten to undo all that we teach them. And while we need to fear what our kids could be tempted to do, we need to be more concerned with what our kids are led to believe.

You see, the way our kids behave comes from something. Their attitudes and actions spring from their value system, and their value system is based on what they believe. In his book *Kingdom Education*, my friend Dr. Glen Schultz, a Christian educator, says, "At the foundation of a person's life, we find his beliefs. These beliefs shape his values, and his values drive his actions."¹ Glen illustrates this through a pyramid that graphically makes the point that our visible actions are a direct result of our beliefs and values (see diagram).²

And while we need to fear what our kids could be tempted to do, we need to be more concerned with what our kids are led to believe.

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THE MAKING OF AN INDIVIDUAL



Research shows, for example, that kids who *believe* that premarital sex is morally right are far more likely to be sexually active. Their beliefs shape their values, and their values lead them to exhibit specific attitudes and actions.

This is precisely why, for example, many studies (among them our own study of more than 3,700 kids who regularly attend church) reveal that young people who lack a basic biblical belief system are

- 225 percent more likely to be angry with life
- 216 percent more likely to be resentful
- 210 percent more likely to lack purpose in life
- 200 percent more likely to be disappointed in life³

Their beliefs create values that result not only in certain attitudes but also in specific behaviors. That's why research has shown that kids—otherwise good kids from good families—who don't possess a biblical belief system are

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- 36 percent more likely to lie to a friend
- 48 percent more likely to cheat on an exam
- 200 percent more likely to steal
- 200 percent more likely to physically hurt someone
- 300 percent more likely to use illegal drugs
- 600 percent more likely to attempt suicide⁴

While this may be disturbing it should not surprise us, because our actions flow out of our values, which arise from our beliefs. But what may surprise you is that the majority of our young people don't even hold to a biblical belief system. Our kids, even those from solid Christian homes and churches, have distorted beliefs about God and the Bible, beliefs that are having a devastating rippling effect into every aspect of their lives.

OUR KIDS' DISTORTED BELIEFS

Now I realize that many parents and gatekeepers will tell me that they have good kids and they're so impressed with the attitudes of their young people. And, in part, research bears this out. Even after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the studies show our kids have maintained an impressive set of personal priorities. Research we commissioned from the Barna Research Group after the 2001 terrorist attacks reveals the following:

- 65 percent of today's young people want a close relationship with God.⁵
- 49 percent want to make a difference in the world.⁶
- 79 percent consider having close personal friends as a high-priority goal for their future.⁷

Based on the research, if I had to summarize in one sentence

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what I believe kids want, I would say *they want a healthy, relationally significant life on earth and a home in heaven*. Today's young people appear to be the most occupationally and educationally ambitious generation ever, and they possess a high degree of spiritual interest. The "Third Millennium Teens" study (also performed by the Barna Research Group) reports that "4 out of 5 teens (80 percent) say that their religious beliefs are very important in their life."⁸

But because you and I care about the future of our young people, we must look at what our kids are really believing in three areas—their beliefs about God, truth, and reality. For it is what our kids believe that will eventually define everything they come to be, as well as determine the most important choices they make in life. And what our kids currently believe is alarming.

1. Our Kids Are Adopting Distorted Beliefs about God

Gather a group of teenagers together—good Christian kids—and ask them, "Who do you think God is?" "What do you think God is like?"

What kinds of answers do you suppose you'll get? They probably won't differ much from those reported by Rob Rienow, a youth minister at Wheaton Bible Church, Wheaton, Illinois, in a *Newsweek* cover story titled "What Teens Believe":

Their answers were as individual as the kids themselves. One thought God was like his grandfather: "He's there, but I never see him." Another took a harder view, describing "an evil being who wants to punish me all the time." Two more opinions followed. Finally, the last teen weighed in: "I think you're *all* right, because that's what you really believe." In other words, as Rienow relates it, God is whatever works for you. On this, all of the youth agreed.⁹

This generation may be open and vocal about their faith—even to the point of wearing their Christian witness on T-shirts and WJJD bracelets—but many of them are defining God in their own

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ways. In the Barna “Third Millennium Teens” research we’ve already quoted, 70 percent of the teenagers surveyed were active in some church youth group, and 82 percent identified themselves as Christians. We are talking about your youth and mine—good Christian kids from good Christian homes and churches. The study revealed these conclusions:

- The vast majority of our teens (80 percent) believe that God created the universe.
- 84 percent believe that God is personally involved in people’s lives.

Yet, in spite of these orthodox views,

- 63 percent also believe that Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and all other people pray to the same god, even though they use different names for their god.¹⁰

And what did these teens say they believe about Jesus?

- 87 percent of our kids believe Jesus was a real person who came to earth, and 78 percent believe he was born to a virgin.
- Yet nearly half (46 percent) believe he committed sins, and over half (51 percent) say he died but *did not* rise from the dead!¹¹

And in their minds is Christianity the only way to salvation?

- 48 percent of teenagers today believe that it doesn’t matter what religious faith you associate with because they all believe the same principles and truth.
- 58 percent believe that all religious faiths teach equally valid truth.¹²

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Your child or youth group may believe that Jesus really lived and that he was actually born of a virgin. Your son or daughter may even be among the minority who believe that Christ rose from the dead. But the vast majority of our own kids (65 percent) either believes or suspects that there is “no way to tell which religion is true”!¹³ Their view of God is so distorted that they’re not convinced that the Jesus of the Bible is the way, the truth, and the life for “all the children of the world.”

It is not that our kids are rejecting Christianity as they know it—they have simply been influenced to redefine it according to their cultural setting. They are putting together their own religious canon in a smorgasbord style. They are led to believe it is better to pick and choose from various ideas, concepts of God, and religion around them until they construct a tailor-made “faith,” one that’s just right for them. They are being encouraged to piece their faith

together themselves; that way it will be theirs personally, and it will offend no one.

They are putting together their own religious canon in a smorgasbord style.

As *Newsweek* reporter John Leland discovered, “Even more than their baby-boomer parents, teenagers often pick and choose what works for them. . . . As they sample from various faiths, students have become more accepting of each other’s beliefs, even when those beliefs are stringent. Clayton, a high-school junior, says he is known among his classmates as ‘the religious guy,’ but this does not make him the odd man out. Clayton, 17, an evangelical Christian, is one of a growing minority of teenagers who are vowing to defer sex until marriage. “There really is an atmosphere of whatever you think is OK,” he says. “Just don’t tell me what to think. I’ll figure it out myself.”¹⁴

Clayton, like many of our Christian kids, may be taking a temporary stand for some good things. But how they determine what is true (and what is good) is alarming. Today’s culture encourages our young people to “figure it out” themselves, and what most are

“figuring out” is a little truth here and a little error there until they end up with erroneous beliefs.

2. Our Kids Are Embracing Distorted Beliefs about Truth

Picture a youth-group Bible study. The adult group leader, who has just finished reading a Scripture passage, turns to a student and asks, “Alicia, what does this verse mean?”

Alicia, a professed Christian from a good Christian home, pauses to reflect on the passage. “Well,” she begins, after a few moments of careful consideration, “what this verse means to me is . . .”

Chances are, most of us wouldn’t even detect the subtle shift in meaning reflected in Alicia’s use of the words *to me*. But the importance of those two tiny words must not be underestimated. They are indicative of another dangerous condition that exists among today’s Christian young people: Most of them are not looking to the biblical text for truth; they are actually looking within themselves. The majority of today’s youth (70 percent) say there is no absolute moral truth.¹⁵

For the most part, many church and parachurch youth workers have become group facilitators rather than teachers of scriptural truth. And it’s not so much because group leaders are not intending to share the meaning of scriptural truth—many are. The problem is that young people simply hear truth through their own “filter,” which tells them that all truth is subjectively and personally determined.

For example, listen to Amber, a typical sixteen-year-old Christian from a solid youth group, respond to my questions.

“Is it wrong to engage in premarital sex?” I ask.

“Well, I believe it’s wrong for me,” she responds.

I probe further. “But do you believe the Bible teaches that premarital sex is wrong for everyone?”

Amber’s eyes shift back and forth as she weighs her answer. “Well,” she begins slowly, “I know it’s wrong for me, and I have

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chosen not to have sex until I'm married. But I don't think I can judge other people on what they do."

You see, it's not that Amber doesn't believe the Bible provides "a clear and totally accurate description of moral truth." She, like 61 percent of our kids, would say that's exactly what she believes.¹⁶ But she's like the majority of our young people, who have been conditioned to believe that truth is not true for them *until they choose to believe it*.

Our kids have been conditioned to believe that truth is not true for them until they choose to believe it.

lieve it. That's why 81 percent of our kids claim that "all truth is relative to the individual and his/her circumstances."¹⁷

Now, you might be wondering, "Who's teaching kids these things? And how are they doing it without my knowledge?" The culprit in this case is not a person. It is a philosophy that permeates much of our culture—govern-

ment, schools, movies, television, and music. It is a widespread cultural mind-set and influence known as postmodernism.

Trying to define and truly understand postmodernism can be a lot like standing in an appliance store trying to watch three or four television shows at once. It defies definition because it is extremely complex, often contradictory, and constantly changing.

In fact, it's fitting that the very term *postmodernism* describes this school of thought by *what it's not*. In other words, postmodernism is the philosophy that succeeded and, to some degree, supplanted modernism, a way of thinking that has itself challenged the Christian worldview for centuries. Whereas modernism rejected religion and superstition in favor of science and reason, postmodernism repudiates any appeal to reality or truth.

So, while postmodernism is tough to pin down, it is possible to summarize its most common beliefs:

- Truth does not exist in any objective sense.
- Instead of "discovering" truth in a "metanarrative"—which is

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a story (such as the Bible) or ideology (such as Marxism) that presents a unified way of looking at philosophy, religion, art, and science—postmodernism rejects any overarching explanation of what constitutes truth and reality.

- Truth—whether in science, education, or religion—is created by a specific culture or community and is “true” only in and for that culture.
- Individual persons are the product of their cultures. That is, we are not essentially unique individuals created in the image of God; our identities are defined by our culture (African-American, European, Eastern, Western, urban, rural, etc.).
- All thinking is a “social construct.” In other words, what you and I regard as “truths” are simply arbitrary “beliefs we have been conditioned to accept by our society, just as others have been conditioned to accept a completely different set of beliefs.”¹⁸
- Any system or statement that claims to be objectively true or unfavorably judges the values, beliefs, lifestyle, and truth claims of another culture is a power play, an effort by one culture to dominate other cultures.

Our young people, along with the culture at large, have embraced these concepts of truth, and they’ve done it, more or less, while we were napping. Even the tragic events of September 2001 have not brought a nation back to a recognition of God as the absolute arbiter of truth. In fact, our culture is less inclined to believe in the existence of absolute moral truth than ever before. Before September 2001, Barna’s research revealed that only four out of ten adults (38 percent) believed there is absolute moral truth that does not change according to the circumstances. When the same question was asked after the September terrorist attacks, the result was that just two out of ten adults (22 percent) claimed to believe in the existence of absolute moral truth.¹⁹

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While the somewhat sudden dawn of postmodernism has been shaping an entire generation, it has caught many of us—parents, pastors, educators, and youth workers—by surprise. As a result, we have been slow to understand its impact and counter its influence. And because most of our kids seem to have a keen interest in spiritual things, most adults are not alarmed. But as I said before, we have reason for alarm. As the studies show, the postmodern influence has had a profound effect on what our

Postmodern influence has had a profound effect on what our kids believe about God, truth, and reality.

kids believe about God, truth, and reality.

Thus, while young people may be willing to believe that Christianity offers a “truth,” they’re not convinced it is *the* truth, the only hope for salvation and relationship with the God of the universe. Also, they are not trying to understand the objective truth of God’s

Word and live out that truth in their lives. As Andy Crouch, editor-in-chief of *re:generation quarterly*, points out, “The . . . historical truth of a biblical book is not the burning issue [to today’s youth], but rather how the Scripture speaks to their situation.”²⁰ Therefore, instead of applying scriptural truth to their lives, our kids are using Scripture merely as a springboard for thought as they attempt to create their own personal “meaning,” one that may have little or nothing to do with the objective meaning of the biblical text.

3. Our Kids Are Accepting Distorted Beliefs about Reality

Not only are today’s young people adopting a distorted belief about God and embracing a distorted view of truth, they have also become very pragmatic; they want what is real, relevant . . . and “right now.” As we’ve said earlier, kids today place a premium on spiritual things and meaningful relationships.

The problem, however, is that the majority of our young people have become convinced that what is true and relevant is whatever works right now. If Hugh Hefner’s motto that “if it feels good,

do it" characterized the sixties, today's culture propagates the view that "if it works, it's right for you." According to the Barna studies, 72 percent of our teens believe that "you can tell if something is morally/ethically right for you by whether or not it works in your life."²¹

Consequently, our kids feel no need to discuss such abstract ideas as the absolute truth of God's Word; they see little reason to grapple with what they believe about Christ and why. "What's the point?" they would most likely say. "As long as it works for me, that's all I care about." They have bought into a line of reasoning that says, "Don't bore me with your rules, your values, or your belief systems. And don't tell me what to think. I'm supposed to figure out what works myself, in the real world."

Today's culture propagates the view that "if it works, it's right for you."

Our kids need to see our lives as living examples of the wisdom and practicality of a life that is built on biblical principles of right and wrong. After all, there is a big difference between what seems to work for the moment and what is right. For example: What if cheating on an exam meant the difference between our kids' passing or failing; would it be okay to cheat because it works at the moment? What if stealing could make life easier or better; would they say it is all right to steal? What if lying to friends might avert a big argument; would they think it is better to lie? For many of our kids, the answer is, "Well, if it would work for me right now, it would be 'right.'" That is because most of our kids and many adults as well have bought into a cultural mind-set that says we work out our lives independently of God's absolute standards of right and wrong.

But does that approach actually work in the real world? Not for long, it doesn't. Because in this cause-and-effect world that God created, his absolute ways are what "works." His ways protect us from harm. His ways provide safety and blessing for us. If you possess a biblical worldview (and sadly many adult Christians do not),

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you would tend to say, “If it’s right, it will work,” for God is “the fountain of life, the light by which we see” (Psalm 36:9).

Adults who have a biblical perspective know that in this orderly world God created, his ways “work” better than seat-of-the-pants pragmatism; when we try to fashion our own version of reality—and live outside of God’s design for us—we will suffer negative consequences.

But the vast majority of our kids don’t have that maturity, experience, and biblical worldview. And the adult models that many of our young people have seen have led them to hold distorted beliefs about reality. And their pragmatic “what works right now is right for now” will eventually lead them down a path of self-destruction.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT, BUT THERE IS STILL HOPE

It does matter what our kids believe about God and his Word. Their ability to stand strong morally, spiritually, emotionally, and relationally is at stake. The time is now for every denomination, parachurch ministry, local church, and family to ground their children and young people in what we believe as Christians and why we believe it. This is important not just because our kids need to adopt our values but also because their very understanding of the meaning of life depends on it. And that is what this book is all about.

In the pages that follow we will explain how deepened beliefs in God and his Word can so ground a person in his or her relationship with God that they will answer the fundamental questions of life itself: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” “Where am I going?” It is by leading our young people to truly know the one true God that we will help our kids find their true sense of identity, purpose, and destiny in life. Then they will be fortified spiritually, morally, and emotionally to stand strong in the face of today’s culture.

A Crisis of Beliefs

But we must not delay. Time is running out.

Let me put it this way. I have often said, “The youth of today will be the church of tomorrow.” But I’m afraid I can’t say that anymore because if we don’t do something *now* to reeducate our kids in the foundations of the Christian faith, the young people we’re counting on to lead the church into the next generation won’t even *be in* the church of the next generation!

I realize I haven’t painted a very pretty picture here. Yet I believe there is still hope. I am hopeful, first, because although our kids do have distorted beliefs about God, truth, and reality, few of them have solidified their positions.

The studies reveal that 74 percent of our kids are still trying to figure out the purpose and meaning of their lives, and 63 percent admit that they don’t have any set “philosophy about life that consistently influences their lifestyle and decisions.”²² That gives us a wide-open window of opportunity to counter their distorted views and clarify with them what they should believe—and why.

Second, I’m hopeful because there *is* an effective way to counter the cultural conditioning that has distorted our kids’ belief systems. I know of no better way to reverse the effect of a postmodern worldview than to bring our kids face-to-face with true biblical Christianity. True Christianity not only effectively counters subjective believing, the loss of moral absolutes, and distorted perceptions of reality; it can also transform a person’s behavior so that he or she will no longer be “tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14, NASB).

That is what you and I want for our young people. We want them to stand strong. We want them to be twenty-first-century expressions of Christ’s body, living as “children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which [they] shine

Our kids’ ability to stand strong morally, spiritually, emotionally, and relationally is at stake.

BEYOND BELIEF TO CONVICTIONS

like stars in the universe” (Philippians 2:15, NIV). But in order for that to happen, we must first help them identify their distorted beliefs and move them beyond their subjective belief system to a set of solid convictions in the one true God. Then we can help them develop an objective faith in God that is real, relevant, and right now.