A high-angle, sepia-toned photograph of a man walking away from the camera down a long, empty aisle in a church. The aisle is flanked by rows of wooden pews that stretch into the distance. The man is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt and dark trousers. The lighting is soft, creating a somber and contemplative atmosphere.

Why millennials
are walking away
and how you
can lead them home

ABANDONED FAITH

ALEX McFARLAND
JASON JIMENEZ

Praise for *Abandoned Faith*

As someone whose life work is to strengthen the faith of millennials, I see this book as a caring guide chock-full of practical advice. As a dad of millennials, I see it as a well-timed life preserver in the swelling waves of a cultural storm.

JEFF MYERS, PHD

President, Summit Ministries

Author of *Understanding the Culture*

I have had the privilege of knowing Jason for many years. His ministry is on the front line for today's student.

Abandoned Faith from Focus on the Family is a timely tool for all of us concerned about reaching people under the age of 25. You'll find insight and help from Jason and Alex's message in this book. If you're like me, once you start reading, you won't be able to put it down!

DR. SCOTT DAWSON

Founder and President, Scott Dawson Evangelistic Association

Director, AtlantaFest and Stadium Fest

As a father and a pastor, I appreciate both the honesty with which Jason and Alex present the current situation of many of our millennials and also the hope they offer. This book is full of Scripture, statistics, and an abundance of practical ideas to help the millennial in your life.

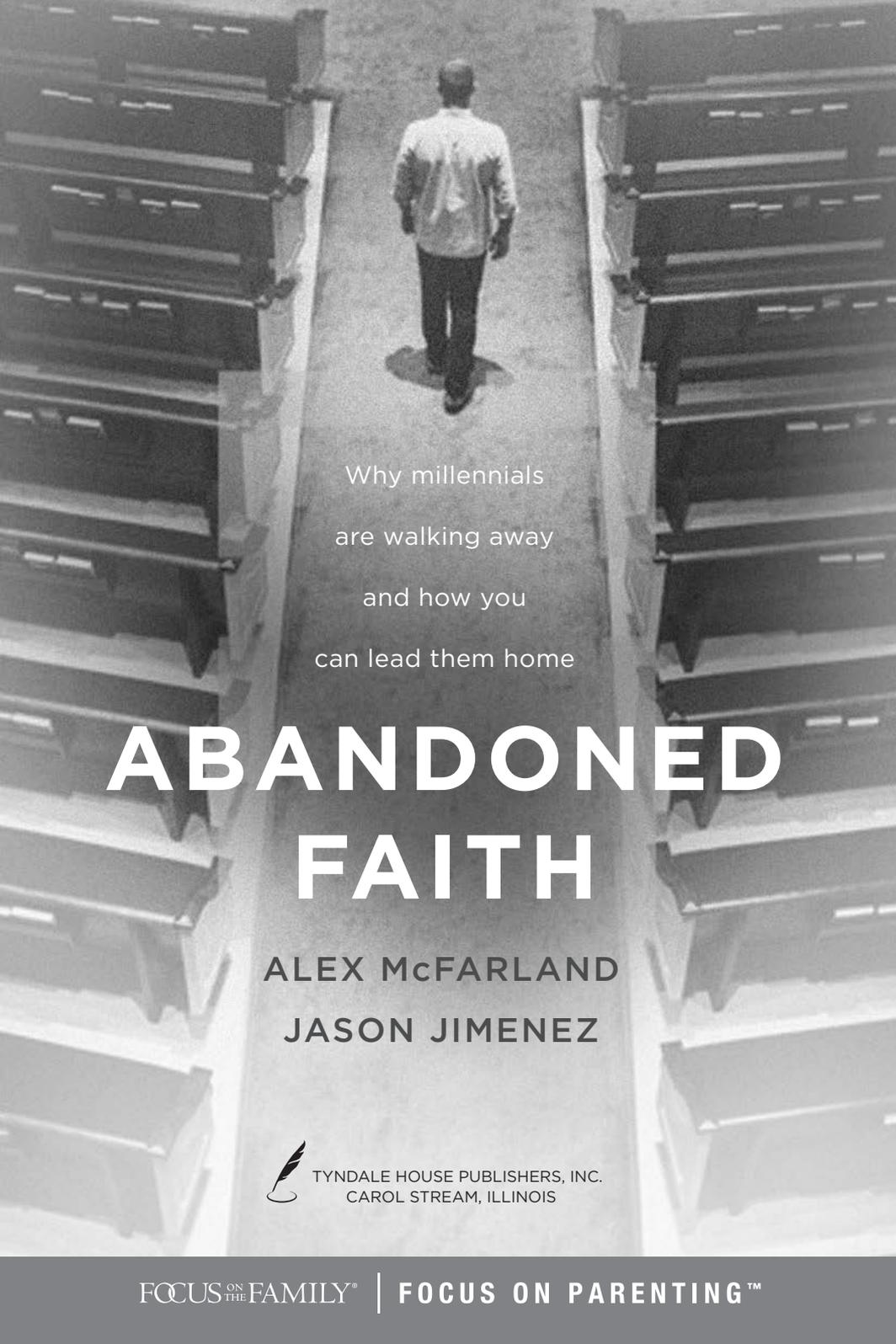
ALEX KENNEDY

Senior Pastor, Carmel Baptist Church

If you're like me, you're aware of the problem: young Christians often walk away from the Church in their high-school and college years. Jason Jimenez and Alex McFarland have written *Abandoned Faith* in an effort to do something about it. They've been working with millennials for years, and they've written a resource to help the Church appreciate the challenge, understand the nature of those who are leaving, and begin to consider an effective response. *Abandoned Faith* is an important book. It will help you understand what is at stake and what you can do about it.

J. WARNER WALLACE

Cold-Case Detective, Adjunct Professor of Apologetics at Biola University
Author of *Cold-Case Christianity*, *Cold-Case Christianity for Kids*, and
God's Crime Scene



Why millennials
are walking away
and how you
can lead them home

ABANDONED FAITH

ALEX McFARLAND
JASON JIMENEZ



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
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Foreword

THERE HAS BEEN A lot of talk recently about why kids are leaving the church. Experts have rightly pointed out that the issue is complex and may involve a host of reasons—intellectual, volitional, personal, relational, spiritual, moral, and more. And yet amidst the difficulty of the matter (both personally and intellectually), my friends Alex McFarland and Jason Jimenez offer a timely book: *Abandoned Faith: Why Millennials are Walking Away and How You Can Lead Them Home*.

I have personally read dozens of excellent books aiming to identify why Christian young people are abandoning the church (and often their faith) in disquieting numbers, and how we can best respond. *Abandoned Faith* is now one of my favorite books. Allow me to briefly share four reasons why.

First, Alex and Jason work with millennials. This is not a solely academic book written from a distance. While there is undoubtedly value in purely scholastic research, this book is filled with personal stories from two authors who both know and love millennials. *Abandoned Faith* is not written from an outsider's perspective but from two experts who both “get” millennials.

Second, *Abandoned Faith* is research based. Alex and Jason have plenty of firsthand experiences with millennials. In fact, much of the book is filled with stories, which I love! But they also draw deeply

from documented research about the thinking, behavior, and unique experience of millennials. They also draw from the expertise of other pastors, teachers, parents, and researchers who work with millennials. Alex and Jason have clearly done their homework.

Third, the book is hopeful. Right at the beginning, the authors recognize that some people reading *Abandoned Faith* might feel a sense of personal regret about the way they have interacted with millennials. In fact, there are probably many parents reading this book who wish they could have a parenting “do over.” Yet rather than sending a message of guilt, Jason and Alex intentionally cover the book in God’s grace. In fact, personally speaking, I found this to be one of the most powerful elements in the book.

Fourth, *Abandoned Faith* is practical. Since I am a professor, I do love research. But I also appreciate when people offer practical steps I can personally take to apply research to my own parenting, speaking, counseling, and ministry to young people. This is exactly what Jason and Alex do.

If you work with millennials in any capacity—such as parenting, pastoring, or even in some professional capacity—this book will be tremendously valuable to you. I am personally grateful that Alex and Jason have taken the time to both research and write this book. After reading it, I feel more motivated and equipped to reach millennials. May God use *Abandoned Faith* to both equip and motivate you in the same way.

Sean McDowell, PhD

Professor of apologetics at Biola University, internationally recognized speaker, and bestselling author of more than 15 books, including *A New Kind of Apologist*

Introduction

FROM CHRISTIANITY TO ATHEISM

THE FAMILY HAD GATHERED for Daniel's birthday party, the oldest son, who was about to turn 25. Daniel was excited to see his relatives, especially his youngest brother, Clayton, a second-semester sophomore attending college in another state.

Daniel had not seen Clayton in over a year.

Growing up in a Christian home, the brothers were close through the years. Daniel had been a spiritual mentor to his younger brother. They grew up praying together and attending Christian camp in the summer. Daniel was at Clayton's baptism when Clayton made a profession of faith as a teenager.

Shortly after the birthday meal blessing, conversation turned to Clayton and his studies as a sophomore. It came to light that classes taught by a professor who was part of The Jesus Seminar had influenced Clayton. (This group of liberal scholars is known for their rejection of the New Testament. Their research methods have been highly criticized and their conclusions against the Bible almost universally rejected, yet

their detrimental influence in the lives of impressionable young students continues.)

Clayton shocked his family by announcing that he was now an atheist. When his uncle at the birthday party began to defend God and Christianity, Clayton quickly responded, “Uncle, are you aware that belief in the virgin birth of Christ was influenced by ancient paganism?”

Clayton’s father explained what the Bible says about the virgin birth of Christ. He hoped years of raising his son in a Christian home and spending thousands of dollars on Christian education hadn’t gone to waste.

Clayton, the newborn atheist, retorted, “Dad. I know you may not like this, but I don’t believe in the Bible anymore. I’ve learned the Bible can’t be trusted. The church has doctored it up through the centuries. It’s all a lie.”

Clayton’s “coming out as an atheist” put a damper on Daniel’s birthday party. The final straw was when the young man stated, “Don’t worry, I am still religious. I worship Richard Dawkins.”

This account (a true story) is all too similar to experiences in the lives of millions of twentysomethings and their families. We have heard it in many forms and all too often.

Raised to Believe Nothing

Meeting with a college student over a cup of coffee, I (Jason) could see he was pretty shaken up. I sat back in my chair and asked the young man why he was so uneasy.

He collected his thoughts and replied, “I’ve really been struggling lately with what I’ve been raised to believe.” He set his coffee down and sat up in his chair. “I know it’s not entirely my parents’ fault, but I don’t think they did a very good job teaching me the Bible and demonstrating how a Christian should live.”

Appreciating his candor, I said, “That may be the case. But rather than focus on the failures of your parents, are you open to figuring out what it is that you believe?”

Thankfully, he agreed.

After months of discipleship and meeting with the student’s parents, it warms my heart to say the family is reconnected and continues to live boldly for Christ. This student’s situation was similar to Clayton’s, but it had a very different outcome. There is always hope.

Image Problem

We have seen vast numbers of students like Clayton and have talked with their families. We have had thousands of discussions with millennials and their parents about family struggles, friendship concerns, and faith doubts. Our travels, conversations, and in-depth studies have helped us discover some unfortunate truths.

Despite the footprint of Christianity in America, its mark on millennials is not as visible as it was with previous generations. An older generation of Christians is dying off and the newer generation’s influence is waning. This millennial

generation consists of those born between roughly 1982 and 2004, though experts cannot agree on specific beginning and end dates. These are your sons and daughters, and their outlook on faith may be vastly different from your own.

These are your sons and daughters, and their outlook on faith may be vastly different from your own.

Over 80 percent of Christians (both young and old) are considered biblically illiterate. That means a mere 2 out of every 10 Christians know how to live, articulate, and defend the Christian faith. Woodrow Kroll commented, “When we speak of creeping Bible illiteracy in America, we are not talking about the inability to read but the choice not to read . . . This failure to read the Bible consistently, or to hear its truth consistently, is the major factor in Bible illiteracy in America. It is an epidemic in . . . America.”¹

Without learning and applying the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the hearts and minds of millions of young people have become less inclined to embrace Christianity. They have failed to become authentic followers of Jesus Christ.

Statistics show that roughly 70 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian.² But when you examine the information a bit further, you find that most have a distorted version of Christianity. This speaks to the “image problem” we face in America. Most Americans view themselves as “Christians,” but not many live the way a Christian is called to live. As a result, many young people reject what

they believe to be Christianity, when in fact, they are really rejecting a false representation of it.

In their book *UnChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons write, “Our research shows that many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.”³

A growing number of millennials are unaffiliated with any particular religion. When asked to designate their religion from a list, most choose “none of the above.” (This group has become widely known as the “nones.”) Yet despite a lack of affiliation, it’s surprising how often these young people pray and hunger for real answers.⁴ It speaks to the desire of millennials to live authentic lives marked with credibility. The majority believe in significance and yearn to make a difference. There’s just one problem: They don’t know how to do it.

A growing number of millennials are unaffiliated with any particular religion.

So there is hope after all. And mom and dad, this is where you come in!

We don’t believe we will win back the hearts and minds of this age of “nones” by overtly trying to make Christianity “attractive.”

We believe it will take a miracle. Really.

But we have faith. We have faith that God will do such a miracle in the lives of our young people. We trust revival will break out in the midst of this generation. We believe the one child who abandoned the faith will once again stand strong for Christ.

The Scripture makes it clear it is incumbent upon all parents to teach and train their children in the timeless truths of the Bible (Deuteronomy 6; Psalm 78). Paul writes, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13).

When parents strive to model a *pattern* of Christianity to their millennial children, those children are far more likely to follow in their parents’ footsteps. There is no one more powerful and uniquely qualified to do this than mom and dad. There is nothing more compelling and persuasive than a parent living out his or her faith with great boldness and conviction.

There is nothing more compelling and persuasive than a parent living out his or her faith.

However, parents must be willing to step up and step out to assume their spiritual roles in the lives of their millennial children. The family is central to the spiritual formation of any child (regardless of the age); but if parents lack the passion and drive to live it and teach it, then the world will ultimately shape our children. (You don’t want that, and neither do we.)

Ever since your child came into the world, you loved, comforted, fed, clothed, and instructed him or her. You

can say that you did the best you could to meet your child's physical needs.

But what about his or her spiritual needs?

What did you and your spouse do to sharpen your millennial's biblical worldview? Is your adult child's faith stronger now than it was when he or she was a child? Whether or not your adult child is living for Christ, it's natural for a parent to feel some responsibility. On the other hand, some parents take all the blame for their adult child's sinful choices.

Many parents we talk to wish they could go back in time and undo the mistakes they made with their children.

One couple said that seeing their college-age child living in sin and professing atheism reminds them constantly of their failure to raise him in the truth and grace of Christ. When their son was growing up, dad traveled while mom did her best to raise the kids. They described their home as Christian, but after years of arguing and fighting, they realized how far they were from truly living a Christian life. We will never forget these words: "Every time we see our son fail, it reminds us of how we failed him."

"Every time we see our son fail, it reminds us of how we failed him."

We are here not to blame parents like these for past failures but to help them understand contributing factors in their adult children's lives and move forward with hope for their adult children.

We're Losing Altitude!

In a recent study, LifeWay Research and Fuller Youth Institute estimated that over half of high school graduates will leave the church and become disengaged in their faith. This is alarming because many emerging adults are making big decisions that affect more than just their own lives—and they are making those decisions without faith in God.

You may have a child who has rejected Christianity, or you may simply have a desire to help build an unshakable foundation for your child. Whatever the case, Christian par-

We are knee-deep in a culture war for our children's faith.

ents need to be armed and ready to wage war for the hearts and souls of their adult children.

We are knee-deep in a culture war for our children's faith and for the future fate of Christianity in America. Satan never stops scheming and spreading lies. He doesn't want you standing firm in the faith, nor does he want you leading your family. He uses the guilt and regret many parents carry to advance his agenda.

It's clearly going to take a lot of prayer and hard work to equip parents to rise up and use their influence and faith to change the direction of their homes.

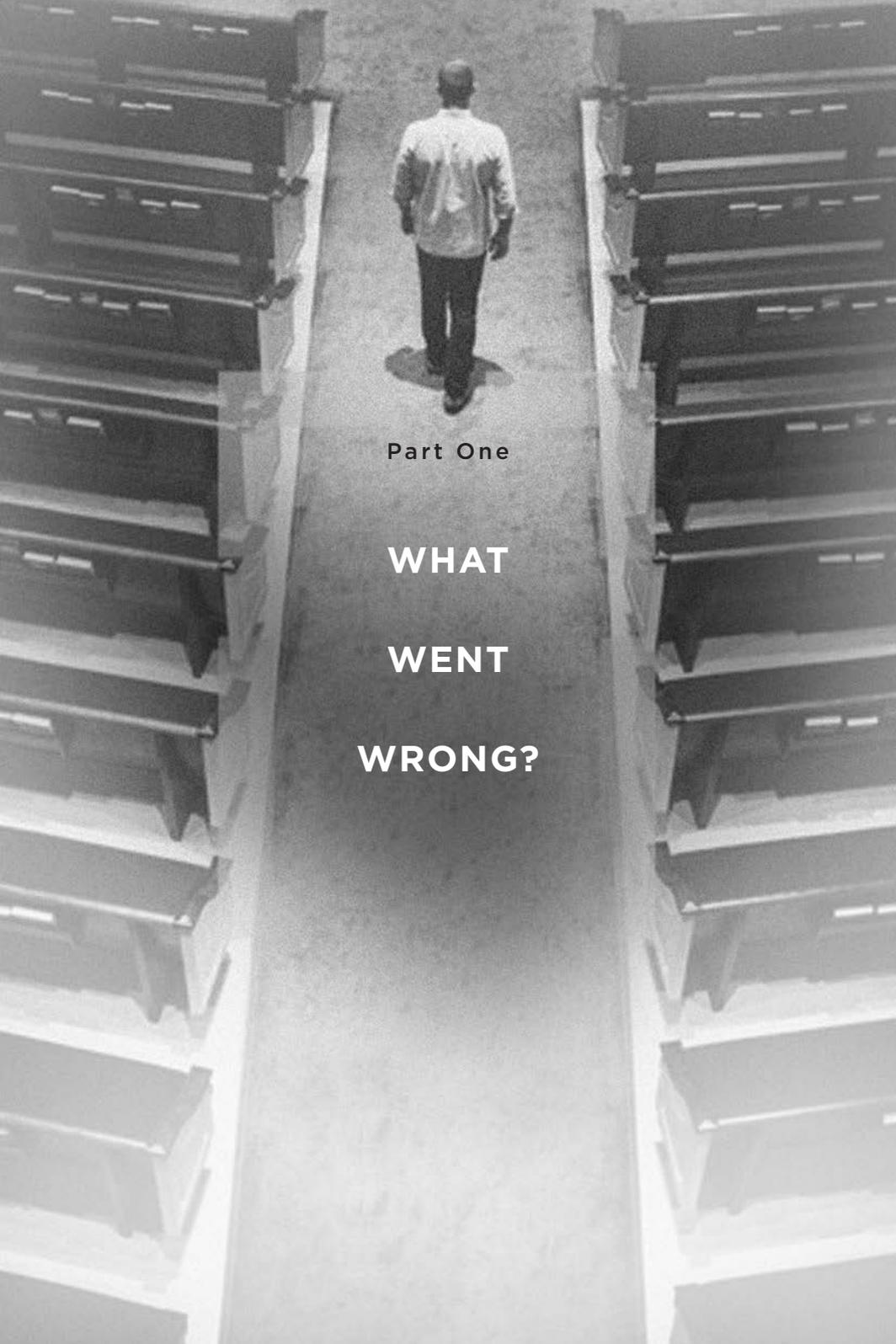
But it's worth it.

If you're desperate to learn about your millennial and you want to find a better and more powerful way to communicate with him or her, then we welcome this opportunity to

help reinforce your responsibility to have a strong relationship with your adult child.

Your child might be an adult, but that doesn't mean you're not to play a role in his or her life. We want to empower you to do that, so we've sought some of the most respected Christian minds to help you understand the worldview of typical millennials and, hopefully, to bridge the gaps that exist between you and your adult child.

It is our prayer that each page will deepen your faith and equip you with the courage you need to become the parent your children (young or old) need you to be.



Part One

**WHAT
WENT
WRONG?**

Chapter 1

HOPE FOR HURTING PARENTS

IN AN AUDIENCE OF 200 ADULTS, I (Jason) asked, “Does anyone here have a son or daughter who has left the faith?” The response was startling. Almost every couple in the room had a child who had left the faith.

In one sense, as the different couples raised their hands, there was a sense of relief in the group. Parents realized that they weren’t the only ones whose children had “wandered.” It was moving to see these parents share so openly. It also was powerful evidence of the size of the problem.

One older gentleman said, “My son didn’t want anything to do with God after his mother died.” Another woman said, “My daughter came out as a lesbian. And when she did, the

church didn't want anything to do with her. This was the church she grew up in. But because the rejection she received was so harsh, it caused her to doubt everything she believed growing up."

To my surprise, the stories kept coming. I had planned to teach an entire lesson, but the Holy Spirit had other plans. After hearing such deep-seated pain from so many in the class, I stood before them in silence. Before I could say anything, the sound of sobbing came from a well-dressed man in the back. He was sitting next to his wife, with their hands clinched together. She was tearful as well. I motioned to him, trying to offer some comfort. He raised his head, attempting to gain control, as the group listened in anticipation.

Finding strength, the father finally said, "I didn't do enough." The moment he said that, his wife grabbed his hand and tightly brought it to her chest. He quickly sank into his chair and placed his head in his open hands. I gave him some time, then asked what he meant by saying he didn't do enough.

He sat up. "I wasn't there for my kids the way I needed to be as a father. And now they're grown up, and neither of them has a strong faith. I should've done more. I should've been more of a leader, rather than leave my wife or the church to do it for me."

After the meeting, I spoke with the wife of this man. He was probably too emotional to stick around. She shared a few additional things about her adult children and explained

how she and her husband were slowly working through the pain. I reassured her about her position in Christ and her influential role as a mother.

After gathering my things, I walked out of the room with a man who had several grandchildren. He expressed how much the class meant to him. I put my arm around him, and thanked him for being so kind. He then stopped and said, “You know that man who shared he wished he’d spent more time discipling his kids?”

I nodded.

He said, “I not only wish I did more for my kids, but now, at my age, I also have grandkids who are not living for the Lord. That pains me more than anything. And I feel I contributed to that, like a generational curse. I didn’t really live out my faith. It was more like something I kept to myself. And now, my kids and their kids aren’t living for Jesus.”

The feelings of regret were so strong among that group of parents.

The feelings of regret were so strong among that group of parents. Their pain was shared and common in the large audience. It may be pain you feel yourself—one accompanied by a sense of hopelessness. Take heart. You are not alone.

Christian Parents and Their Millennial Children

God’s design for family is for parents to raise their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord—to train them to live holy lives. Proverbs 14:27 says, “The fear of the LORD

is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.” Though this proverb is true and worthy of all acceptance, it is not an easy one to follow consistently. It would have been great if you (as the parent) had told your kids to fear God and follow your picture-perfect example. If they did, they would escape death and receive the fountain of life.

But that’s not usually how it works out.

The truth is, most parents try to raise their children in the fear of the Lord. Unfortunately, many of these children (now adults) still turn away from Christianity. The purpose of

Many have sought answers to explain the decline of Christianity among millennials.

this book is to help you understand what has happened generationally and discover how you can respond in a positive way.

The shift in faith on the part of the millennial generation has captured the minds of experts and produced a ton of research. From the psychologists to student pastors, many have sought answers to explain the decline of Christianity among millennials.

What happened to them?

Why are millennials leaving the church?

Where did we go wrong?

Will they ever come back?

These, and many other questions, have plagued the hearts and minds of loved ones—mostly parents.

Much focus in the church these days has been directed

at reaching twentysomethings. So far, the church has been generally unsuccessful.

Attempts to “dumb down” the message of the gospel have been a big mistake.

There have been efforts to modernize and introduce loud, secularized worship music, played by people on stage wearing beanies, tight cut V-neck T-shirts, and ridiculously skinny jeans. Fail.

Some churches have attempted to create an atmosphere where everyone is right and no one is wrong. Total fail.

Many of these attempts to *reach* millennials have not worked. We are not surprised. After a combined 40 years of working with millennials, we can tell you that much of the church’s strategy is totally wrong.

***Ministering to
millennials is a
daunting task.***

Ministering to millennials is a daunting task. You never know what you are going to get from them. Especially from embittered ones raised in so-called “Christian” homes. Yet despite the massive decline of Christianity among millennials (which we will examine in depth), we are seeing many of them return to Christ, like the Prodigal Son described in Luke 15.

Our point is, there is still hope. No matter what you are going through right now with your son or daughter—know that there is still hope. Hope for you, your spouse, and your child. But if you and your spouse want to receive hope and healing, then you first need to face your pain, your regrets, and your fears and doubts.

Let’s address these difficult issues together, one by one.

Unspeakable Pain

Church pews are filled with parents experiencing deep pain—pain over the fact that their son or daughter (or both) is no longer living for Christ.

Most parents, if they are honest, will tell you they are hurting. They hurt over the bad choices their adult children are making. They hurt over the intimacy they once had with their son or daughter.

Sunday after Sunday, parents sit in church, then go off to their Sunday school classes never speaking of the pain they suffer over their millennial child. And if they do share about this pain, it's often presented as a silent prayer request and nothing more.

This silent suffering has to stop.

Often we are so worried about the spiritual state of millennials that we have neglected to care for the condition of their parents. The amount of pain experienced by parents is overwhelming. They are getting hammered. Consider this email from a mother about her son:

When your children are younger, it is so much easier to involve yourself in their lives. But when they get older and leave home, it's much more difficult to know your place. When your child pushes you away and makes his own bad decisions and then wants your help, only to disregard it again, it breaks your heart. As a parent, instead of looking forward

to talking with your adult children, you begin to dread the calls because you know that there will be another issue to deal with. You want to be the hero and have all the answers. But you know that no matter what you say, they won't always listen. It's a tough place to be in because you feel disrespected, and angry—and on top of it all, you feel like you failed your child. All I want is to have a mature and healthy relationship with them. All I want is for my children to need me in their lives.

If we are going to win millennials back to Christ, we first need to win parents back to hope and healing.

What a moving message. The heart of this mother captures what many parents feel.

It's too easy to overlook the pain of parents when all the attention is on the problems of their children. Yet, if we are going to win millennials back to Christ, we first need to win parents back to hope and healing.

Unfortunately, many of the problems millennials deal with stem from their parents. Whether these are problems of divorce, hypocrisy, dysfunctional relationships, legalism, overprotective parenting—whatever the case—if we are going to see a major turnaround among millennials, they need to see change first in moms and dads.

We have had many conversations with millennials on this very topic. Many have said that although they were raised in Christian homes, it never seemed Christianity was at the

core of everything they did. I (Jason) remember one college student saying, “I think the only reason my parents go to church is to feel better about themselves.”

Another student said, “The only time we learned about the Bible was when we went to church.”

That’s not to say these parents didn’t try or didn’t care. Not at all. What millennials are saying is that the gospel was not at the center of their homes. It was a part of home life, but it was not the totality of it. The transfer of the Christian faith from one generation (parents) to the next (their children) is almost nonexistent. Millennials may have received a degree of faith from a parent or parents, but it wasn’t enough for them to see the value and importance faith has in their own lives.

This is a painful reality for parents. It’s painful because their millennials are right. In too many families, faith went only as far as church attendance. Sure, throw in a few extra church activities, a few family devotions, and lectures about doing the right thing. But the truth is, many parents do feel they failed in leading their children spiritually. Now that their kids are adults, these same parents struggle with relating to them. All they can do is watch helplessly as their adult children live their lives not for God but for themselves.

Waves of Regret

As parents open up about this deep pain, inevitably a great deal of regret resides within each one. These parents have

tried everything to get rid of it, but the regret never seems to go away.

I (Jason) remember an older pastor sharing with me about his prodigal son. He and I were sitting in his office before I was about to preach in his church. I saw many pictures of his beautiful family there. But I noticed he had current pictures only of his daughters and not his son. When I commented on it, he said that he and his wife had not spoken to their son in years.

The pastor teared up and said, “I’m to blame that he’s running away from God. I was too busy ministering to others, and I didn’t do enough for my son. That’s my biggest regret.”

***We all have regrets
and know other
godly parents who
do as well.***

Sound familiar? Take out *ministering to others* and fill in the blank. The fact is, there is not one single parent alive in this world free from regret. We all have regrets and know other godly parents who do as well.

Sean Lee is a caring and vibrant woman who has served as a children’s director for nearly thirty years. She is well respected and does an outstanding job ministering to children and families.

When I (Jason) asked her about parental regrets, Sean said she wished she had done a better job helping her three boys engage the culture, especially when they were in high school. “Instead of engaging them in conversation about cultural issues, I was more concerned with trying to protect them. My husband and I were constantly evaluating their choices,

especially in terms of their friends. We would freak out if they were around things we were trying so hard to protect them from. By the time they went off to college, it was a real culture shock for our boys. Looking back now, I wish we hadn't sheltered them so much but instead rephrased a lot of the conversation with them so they were more prepared when they went to college."

Sean acknowledged that many parents feel the same way she does. But rather than sulk about it, Sean said she has learned from her mistakes and works hard to maintain healthy and strong relationships with each of her boys.

We need to let our regrets go just as Sean did. She knew that if she was going to continue to impact her boys in their adult years, she had to learn what they needed from her. She would need to be a support to them whenever and however it was required, to listen when they needed to talk, and to be there to ask penetrating questions as they thought through their decisions.

Sean learned about God's grace in the hard times of parenting. "Parenting is about grace. My parenting may never be perfect, but when I seek God's grace day after day, I actually have learned more about His love for me and what I am truly capable of accomplishing as a mother."

In her book *Building the Christian Family You Never Had*, Mary DeMuth spoke of letting go of regret: "Inevitably we carry some amount of parental regret. Freedom from regret comes when we admit our weaknesses before Jesus. No one is perfect. Our imperfections, though, shouldn't become a

wall between God and us or our children and God. At the cross we can lay down our regrets over our failures and move on. Remember that even the great heroes of the Bible did things they regretted.”¹

Holding on to regrets prevents you from experiencing true freedom in Christ.

Holding on to regrets prevents you from experiencing true freedom in Christ. It’s hard not to think back on all the moments you should have acted differently. Every time you recall those not-so-fond moments with your adult child, the less happiness and joy you will feel.

Being tossed around by waves of regret is actually where Satan, the great Adversary, wants you to be. He doesn’t want you to let your regrets go. He wants you to drown in them. Every time you see your son or daughter making bad choices, Satan wants you to feel regret. He wants you to blame yourself for their sinful choices. But like the apostle Paul, you need to gain this assurance: “One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13).

A *woulda-coulda-shoulda* attitude does not help you. It only makes matters worse between you and your millennial child. The key is not to *regret* having regrets. (That only brings on more regrets.) Instead, give your regrets over to God and allow His healing power to take control of your life. As the old saying goes: *you can’t change the past, but you can learn from it.*

In addition to pain and regret, there is a dual enemy we must also confront—fear and doubt.

Enabling Fear and Doubt

Raising kids is scary. Especially when you have to let them go. When they were younger, you were there for them, 24/7. You made decisions for them because they were too young to make decisions for themselves. Now they are all grown up, and you have to trust that everything you taught them won't be forgotten. Of course, children (young or old) won't always do the right thing. They will make mistakes, mistakes you cannot (or should not) fix. It's a touchy subject, especially for enabler parents who tend to interfere with all aspects of a child's life.

Let's put this into perspective by way of a story about a desperate mother.

We were filling in as speakers on a radio show that was about to wrap up. On the incoming-calls screen was this question from a caller: *How can I win back my daughter to Christ?*

We immediately grabbed the call, knowing that we didn't have much time. We welcomed the caller to the show and asked how we could be of help. She immediately began to cry on the air. After a long pause (which is very awkward on radio), she gained her composure. She had just gotten into another argument with her daughter. They had both lost it, and the mother had gotten into the car and taken off.

Her radio was tuned to our program, and she heard what we were talking about and called in. We were glad she did.

The mother explained that she tried to raise her daughter in a Christian home. But the daughter rejected everything the mother stood for. She tried everything, but nothing reached the young woman.

Our hearts broke for this mother. And for her daughter.

With limited time, I (Jason) began to ask this mother a series of questions. It turned out the woman was divorced, an overprotective parent who always *fixed* her daughter's mistakes. Naturally, there was a lot of resentment between mom and daughter, and it was obvious that good communication wasn't a skill either possessed.

“Why won't you stop trying to fix your daughter, and let God fix you?”

After hearing the discouragement in this mother's voice, I asked one final question: “Why won't you stop trying to fix your daughter, and let God fix you?”

There was dead silence. We thought we had lost her. But then the mother answered, “Because I'm too afraid.”

Wow. What a response. What honesty. This mother expressed what a lot of moms are feeling. For this mom to really be a help to her daughter, she first needed to seek God's help in her own life.

Too often, as parents, we think we know what's best for our kids when, really, God knows best. We love our children, but God loves them so much more. We believe we know our children better than anyone, yet God knew them before they

were born. We are assured in Psalm 139:16, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

As parents, we can become so overly protective that we neglect to lean into God’s protection for our children. Like this desperate mother on the radio, parents try to do most of the heavy lifting for their millennial children. There is no denying the love and desires parents have for their children. But stepping in to fix everything isn’t healthy.

Now, parental enablers will argue that they do what they do because their children are incapable of doing it themselves. That may be true to some extent. But the truth is, enabling parents do what they do out of fear. They fear their children will get hurt, or they believe their kids *can’t* do anything without them. And some fear they will not be needed anymore.

Allison Bottke, bestselling author of the acclaimed *Setting Boundaries* series, writes, “Our biggest problem isn’t about our adult child’s inability to wake up when his alarm clock rings, or her inability to keep a schedule, hold down a job, or pay the bills. It’s not about drug use or

Out of fear, some parents never adjust their level of attachment in their kids’ lives, as they get older.

alcohol addictions. It’s not about the mess these adult children are making of their life. The main problem is about the part we’re playing in stepping in to soften the blow of the consequences that come from the choices they make. *The main problem is us.*”²

Too often we pick on a grown-up child for being lazy or too dependent on mom or dad. In reality, the actual problem *might just be* mom and dad. This *fear*-driven parenting creates an unhealthy level of dependency. That's the problem. Out of fear, some parents never adjust their level of attachment in their kids' lives as the kids get older. They think that by enabling their kids, they are doing them a favor. But it has a reverse effect. Millennials raised by enabling parents are far more likely to rebel, abandon church, and hang with the wrong crowd. They are even less likely to land a sustainable career.

This isn't a blame game. This is getting to the heart of the issue. Because of fear, parents act in a way they expect is best for their kids. It's only years later that parents see the damage their parenting approach has done to an adult child.

Of course, in looking back, many parents would do things differently. That explains the doubts they wrestle with later in life. The *woulda-coulda-shoulda* attitude has plagued this parental generation. We can't tell you how many parents we have counseled who struggle with doubt.

Did I do enough?

Did I do too much?

If I only . . .

Does my son think I'm a good parent?

Does my daughter think I'm a good parent?

Many Christian parents doubt they were the parents their children needed them to be. What is a workable solution for parents like these going forward?

Let It Go

Despite the pain, regret, fear, and doubt that may trouble you, rest assured that God is bigger and mightier than your struggles. He is here for you. He has never left your side. He doesn't want you to be trapped by fear. He wants you to turn to Him and trust that He will deliver you from all of your troubles. We read this promise in Psalm 34:4-7: "I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard

him and saved him out of all his troubles.

*When doubts
creep in and you
feel you failed as
a parent, cry out
to the Lord.*

The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them."

When you feel disappointed in the way you parented, or even ashamed, look to God. When doubts creep in and you feel you failed as a parent, cry out to the Lord.

He will heal your pain. Remember, the psalmist says that those who look to God will reflect His glory and will not be ashamed. Every parent needs to hear that. They need to know that they don't have to live a shameful life. What they need to do is let it go and trust that God will restore their family.

Have Faith

Earlier we talked about *fear*-driven parenting—a place all too familiar to most parents. As we stated above, let God set you free from being led by fear. Stop living in the past. Rather,

discover how God can use you in the life of your millennial child right now. Take your focus off *fear*-driven parenting and turn it to *faith*-driven parenting. This is going to be our focus with you: to help you live your life in faith to God.

Let there be no more regrets—only anticipation of the coming blessings. No more doubts—only hope in knowing that God has placed you in your millennial’s life for a divine purpose. God has uniquely equipped you to minister to your children. Peter charged the scattered Christians with these words: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10). The word *steward* denotes authority and responsibility. As parents, you are God’s stewards. You represent Him and have been given the authority and responsibility to serve and to demonstrate His love graciously.

This may be hard for some parents, especially those who struggled with being a strong spiritual leader in their child’s life. But we want each of you to know that we have prayed for every parent to be encouraged as he or she goes through this book. We have asked God, in faith, to pour out His Spirit over you. We’ve asked Him to give you the strength and encouragement needed to be the best steward of His grace to your family.

One of the greatest ways to be a conduit of grace is by living it out for others to see. Paul declared, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27).” The word *manner* literally means “to conduct oneself with proper reference to one’s obligations in relationship to others, as part of some community.”³

Notice that the *manner* or *conduct* of a Christian is in reference to the obligation he or she has to others. In describing Philippians 1:27, *The New Bible Commentary* states, “The gospel has its greatest influence when the lives of Christians commend it, and that gives us our special responsibility. The Greek word translated *conduct yourselves* is the one from which our word ‘politics’ comes and often conveys the idea of fulfilling one’s duty as citizen.”⁴

Christians are not only stewards but also citizens. We are called to fulfill our duties as faithful and true citizens of heaven. We don’t live for ourselves. We live and serve at the pleasure of Jesus Christ.

Thus, when a Christian parent lives out his or her faith in a way that honors God, it will have a lasting impact on his or her children. There is nothing more powerful.

Yes, the parents of millennials could have done a better job. The data agrees. We all agree. But we are well beyond that now. We trust you have released the discouragement weighing you down and given it over to God.

Before we move to the next chapter, there is one more thing you need to release—and that is your children.

Release Your Children

Could you imagine giving up your child? It is hard to imagine. Yet that’s exactly what two couples—Elkanah and Hannah and Amram and Jochebed—had to do.

In Exodus 2:2, we read, “The woman [Jochebed] con-

ceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months [to protect him from the Egyptians]” (brackets added). Jochebed and her family were under oppressive rule. Fearing the rapidly growing population of Hebrews, Pharaoh gave the order for the Egyptians to kill all newly born Hebrew boys. But when Moses’ parents could no longer hide him, his sister put him in a basket—praying someone would care for him (Exodus 2:3-4). What incredible faith Amram and Jochebed had. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict” (11:23, NIV).

Rather than be paralyzed by fear, they released their son to God.

Did you catch that? Moses’ parents saw how special their baby boy was, and they did not fear the Pharaoh’s edict. Rather than be paralyzed by fear, they released their son to God. And the rest is history.

Then there is Hannah, a woman, according to 1 Samuel 1, who was unable to have children. This was a disgraceful position in those days. Infertile women were considered a curse—lawbreakers. It was their legal obligation to produce an offspring for their husbands. Yet Hannah remained barren. She continued to pray for God to grant her and her husband a son, a child they could hold and love one day.

In 1 Samuel 1:10-11, we read, “She [Hannah] was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, ‘O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed

look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.’”

Finally, after much prayer and vexation, the Lord answered Hannah’s prayer.

Why did God answer Hannah’s prayer? Because Hannah cared more about serving God than parenting a child. Hannah prayed for a son, but she also promised to give her son right back to God. Before Samuel was conceived in Hannah’s womb, she had already released him back to God. That’s what you call faith!

Now your story may not be that dramatic. But the lesson is the same. As Amram and Jochebed did with Moses—so must you do with your children. As Hannah prayed, “I will give him to the Lord,” so must you pray, “Lord, I give my children to you. I release them back to you.”

Children are a gift. But they are also on loan. You don’t own your children. They may have your DNA. But they are made in the image of God. You would lay your life down for your kids. But Jesus laid His life down and rose again so that your kids may have eternal life.

Before you go any further, give each of your children completely and totally over to God. You will be glad you did.