

Interview with Josh McDowell April 2006

Phil Callaway: Do you still get *Servant*?

Josh McDowell: I sure do. It's one of the first things I read. I still remember the last interview and the response I got everywhere I went.

That was July of 1990. You were 23 years old.

I was 43.

Here we are 16 years later. You're 51 now and I'm 32. I'm reading your book and it's so good. But "The Last Christian Generation?" Are you just trying to be sensational? I mean, come on, Josh.

Yes, but sensational with substance. I'm trying to raise the alert level. I'm saying we'd better wake up. This is one book I wish to God I'd never had to write it. But over the last ten to twelve years I've sensed trends and realized that as a church we are in trouble—and I'm not the only one seeing it. I felt that I needed to write out a definitive statement on the condition of the church and the optimistic solution to it. That's why I wrote *The Last Christian Generation*. Now this is what's important to understand: it's not the kids; it's the parents. It's not North America; it's the church. In North America we saw the last Christian generation a number of years ago. But now are seeing the last Christian generation within the body of Christ.

You write: "If we as families keep doing what we're doing we'll keep getting what we've got." What are we doing and what have we got?

Right now you can estimate that within 12 months of high school graduation eighty to eighty-five percent of our kids are walking away from the church. If we keep doing what we're doing it will soon be 90 percent.

You say sixty-five percent of our church kids either suspect or believe there is no way to tell which religion is true?

Oh, yeah. You see, in 1994 52 percent of evangelical Christian kids said there is no truth apart from myself, in 1999 that number jumped to 78 percent. Now it is a staggering 91 percent. If you have 91 percent of your kids saying there is no truth, then it's consistent for them to say there's no way to tell which religion is true or not. Sixty-three percent of our kids say Jesus Christ is not the Son of God. He's *a* son of God. Well, that's consistent. If you say there is no truth then you can't make the statement consistently that Jesus is *the* Son of God.

How much of this is a result of parents who haven't figured these things out themselves?

Francis Schaeffer said, "Culture has become post-Christian." I believe now he would say it's become anti-Christian. Kids walking away from school have a greater challenge to their faith than their parents did in four years of high school. Research shows that parents have a 300 percent greater influence on a child's spiritual or theological belief than their pastor or youth pastor. So a lot of it comes down to the parents.

Why are our young people turning their backs on the church?

For one thing, they're the result of programs and not process. They've been raised with programs and events, not raised with a process-driven ministry where the Word of God was internalized into their lives. Second, we have a lack of relationship with Mom and Dad, with leaders in the church, with significant adults in their lives. What engenders

beliefs? It's our relationships. What causes a young person to want to believe your truth and follow it? Like it or not, it's relationships. It's like David said in Psalm 26:3, "I've been constantly aware of your unfailing love and I have lived according to your truth." If he had not seen that unfailing love, he never would have lived according to the truth. In Psalm 86: 11 & 13 David prayed a prayer that every parent in the church would want to pray for their child: "Teach me your ways, Oh Lord." Why? "That I may live according to your truth." Now what is the motivation for that? David said, "For your love for me is very great." That's why David prayed that prayer. That's why he wanted to believe. The beliefs in the truth followed the relationships. And it's the same today. If kids do not have those relationships at home it will have a direct effect on their belief system.

What are some practical things a church should address to change things?

First of all, I think a pastor needs to be aware of the things in this book. If we do not understand the condition of the church, and how we got to where we are, then our solution will miss the bull's eye. Second, we must realize that we're losing our kids, not because they're not hearing truth, but because we're not building relationships with them. Third, we can't raise children today programmatically. We've got to raise them with process. They've got to see truth, all truth biblically was given for relationships. There are three dimensions to biblical truth, like the Incarnation. How does that truth affect you? A child sees a relationship with the truth giver. Exodus 34:14 says you shall worship no other god but the Lord, the God who is passionate about his relationship with you, in other words a God who is jealous about his relationship. Second, is that truth credible? Is it truly true? A kid's got to be convinced of that. Third, how does that truth affect me in my experience and relationship with others? Jesus said, "They will know that you are my disciples," not by the truth you believe, not by your convictions, but how? "If you love one another." All truth was given to be lived out in relationships. And we have failed to show kids how that is true and how that can happen. So my optimistic approach is that if we in the church, in the body of Christ and in our families can get back to teaching truth as a process relationally, let me tell you, Phil, we would have a revolution.

I'm the parent of three teenagers and I want to discuss some of these things with them. But if you're talking to me as a parent, Josh, and you're saying here's what you need to do to make sure that this doesn't happen—some would say, it's too late, they're teenagers. But thank God our teens are really excited about serving God; my oldest is in Uganda right now working with street kids--what would you tell me I need to do? What do they need to see in my life?

Build a relationship with them. God's Word without relationships leads to rejection. Rules without relationships lead to rebellion. You can be the greatest teacher of truth in the whole world, but if in the depths of their hearts, your kids do not believe that "my daddy loves me" they're going to walk. Second, you've got to let them see how truth affects them in a relationship with the truth-giver. You've got to be able to show that it's credible. I hardly ever find anyone including senior pastors who can give me one intelligent reason why they believe the Bible is true or historically reliable and why they believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And so with your children you'd better be able to explain to them why the resurrection is true, why the Bible is true and historically accurate, why you can trust it.

What are you hoping this book accomplishes for the kingdom?

I hope God will use it to wake up the church. We're asleep. Second, I want to see a revolution take place that will take us back to a biblical paradigm of truth where pastors and parents will start teaching relationally. If we do that I guarantee we will see a change.

Some of the statistics in your book are fascinating. What surprised you the most about some of these findings?

Probably in all my research what surprised me the most was the effect of relationships upon a child's belief system. It blew my mind.

Only a small percentage of church youth say the church will play a part in their lives when they leave home?

It's never been lower than 55 percent with any other generation. But now--if we don't make some drastic changes, once this generation marries and has children they will not return to the church the way the Buster generation has to a certain extent.

When you look at these things, Josh, do you ever get a sense of hopelessness?

Yes, I really do.

When do you get the greatest sense of hopelessness?

When we do a pastors' briefing and there sit senior pastors and the overwhelming majority of them take no notes. If ever there's a time when I just want to throw up my hands and walk away, it's during pastors' briefings.

You feel like they don't care?

I don't care who the speaker is, you will not internalize it if you don't record it, except for the rarest situations. When pastors get up to speak they want their congregations to take notes, but they won't. My heart goes out to senior pastors. They've got to be everything to everyone and still try and hold their families and marriages together. The church demands so much of their pastor. He's got to be at every meeting, he's got to marry them, bury them, be an audio-video expert, a fundraiser, a prayer leader, a teacher, an expositor, an evangelist. A pastor can't be all that. They try if the church demands it of them.

I asked you sixteen years ago what you would like to be remembered for. Has that changed?

I still want to be remembered first of all as a man who loved his wife and spent time with his children and lived out his faith. Second, I pray to God that I've had an influence on an entire generation with truth, starting with "Evidence That Demands a Verdict." It just got selected as one of the most helpful and influential books of the last hundred years. But more than anything I want my legacy to be people. Out of people will come organizations, buildings, programs, process. So I don't want to leave buildings. I'm not concerned about leaving a big legacy. I'm concerned about being faithful. And then if I can challenge others to love the Lord with all their heart, mind and soul, my life is complete.

Decoding Da Vinci

Josh McDowell believes that the May 19 release of The Da Vinci Code movie may usher in one of the most controversial periods the Church has faced in years. "The movie brilliantly mixes fact with fiction," he says. "It's going to turn more people away from their faith than anything in the last hundred years by raising questions that even solid Christians will be challenged to answer—questions about the authority of the Church, the deity of Christ, and the authenticity of the Bible. The Christian faith has been under

attack in this culture for decades and because most believers haven't been equipped to know why they believe, the very foundation of Christianity within the Church has eroded." What can be done? "If we are equipped now with solid answers about Christ's deity and His Word, we can blunt the devastating effect this movie is bound to have on nominal believers, seekers, and even solid Christians. My goal is to turn it into one of the most positive platforms for sharing God's love and truth to win inquiring minds that we could have in years. We've got to be positive, we've got to be wholesome, we've got to be winsome. By responding wisely, the Church can be strengthened and many nominal believers and seekers grounded in the true faith of Jesus Christ." When you request a copy of McDowell's book we will include a copy of *The Da Vinci Code: A Quest For Answers* in the hopes that it will be a help to you and your church. If you are able to help with our added costs, we would appreciate it.