

# TCW

TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN

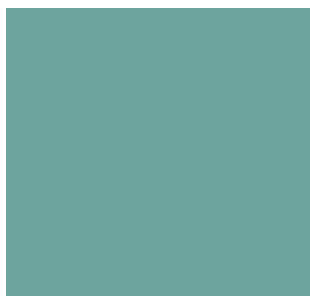
MAY 25, 2016

3 LIES WE BELIEVE  
ABOUT THE BIBLE

THE NEW FACE OF  
INFIDELITY



## Best of TCW



# Contents

MAY 25,  
2015



## FROM THE EDITOR

### The Next Chapter for TCW

God is at work in your story—and ours.  
By Kelli B. Trujillo

### 3 Lies We Believe About the Bible

Dangerous clichés we've crafted from Scripture  
By Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence

### My Double Life as a Secret Addict

I was afraid of being found out, but then grace found *me*.  
By Helen Coronato



### The New Face of Infidelity

What lures Christians to cheat?  
By Corrie Cutrer



## INTERVIEW

### When It's Hard to Call God "Father"

For Jo Saxton, growing to know God as Father meant a long journey of forgiveness.  
Interview by Kelli B. Trujillo



### The Unhappiest Year of My Life

The high (and holy) cost of motherhood  
By Ann Swindell

### Why Are Women Leaving the Church?

The reasons behind the exodus  
By Roxanne Stone





# The Next Chapter for TCW



**Kelli B. Trujillo**, Editor

*God is at work in your story—and ours.*

It's a regular occurrence for me: I'll be editing an article for *Today's Christian Woman* and, with a humbled grin, I shake my head in self-recognition: *I, too, struggle with those same self-centered thoughts.* Or a lump comes to my throat and tears spring to my eyes: *I, too, feel that pain.* Or a laugh of raw joy bursts out: *I, too, rejoice in the surprising hope we find in Christ.*

I see myself—and I encounter Jesus—within the stories and articles I read here. Hundreds of thousands of you do too.

Our articles are read by women (and men!) from all over the globe and from many different cultures and ethnicities, generations, life stages, and denominational backgrounds. And yet despite our differences, we all come together around the stories and truths we encounter in TCW. They are stories that invite us in, validate our honest struggles, and point us toward gospel-hope. They are truths that convict us, direct us, and set us right again.

I love this description of Jesus: he is “the author and perfecter” of our faith (Hebrews 12:2, NASB). Our great creator God is penning his big story of redemption, and each of our lives—our own failures, questions, hopes, and joys—are part of that overarching story of the kingdom. From marriage and parenting to work and ministry to friendship and dating, each part of our own stories matters because devotion to Jesus touches every *single aspect* of our lives.

In this issue of TCW, we're celebrating some of the best articles from the past few years in a few of those essential areas of women's lives. We're highlighting our favorite recent articles on [faith](#), [cultural issues](#), [marriage and sex](#), [parenting](#), [church and ministry](#), and one of our strongest recent [interviews](#).

Here at Christianity Today, we've long recognized the need for honest, thoughtful content



created for and by Christian women. Over the years we have served that audience in various ways, both in print and online. (In fact, I remember reading my mom's print issues of *Today's Christian Woman* in the '90s!) It has been a joy and privilege for us to build this engaging community of readers and writers.

In recent years, we at Christianity Today have been producing three different channels of content for women: *Today's Christian Woman*, [Her.meneutics](#), and [Gifted for Leadership](#). As a ministry, we've prayerfully decided to work toward unifying our efforts to serve our women's audience. For that reason, this "Best of" issue will wrap up the publication of biweekly digital issues of TCW as we work to develop a new, unified vision for women's content at Christianity Today.

We want to continue to serve you, our readers and subscribers, and in the coming weeks we will be launching a new resource we're tentatively calling "CT Women," which will be fully integrated into our flagship brand, [Christianity Today](#). CT Women will build upon the dynamic strengths of TCW, Her.meneutics, and Gifted for Leadership. If you are a subscriber to *Today's Christian Woman*, you will automatically begin receiving *Christianity Today* this summer and will continue to have access to our archives of rich content here at [TodaysChristianWoman.com](http://TodaysChristianWoman.com).


Our hope is that, through your reading of TCW, you've been strengthened in your understanding of God's love for you, you've taken confidence in his calling on your life, and you've embraced your part in his big story as you embody the gospel message to the world. We are grateful for your loyal readership, and we look forward to how we can continue to serve you in the next chapter of our story: CT Women.

Grace,



Kelli B. Trujillo

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● Cover Story

# 3 Lies We Believe About the Bible

*Dangerous clichés we've crafted from Scripture* | **JOY-ELIZABETH LAWRENCE**

I keep notebooks in my kitchen to write down the things my children say, such as the fact that bare (bear) feet say “Grrrr.” I want to remember the time we ate “flamingo” for lunch in our mango and watercress salad. Mistakes like these are a way children learn about language, and though it’s adorable when they’re 3, I certainly don’t want a 23-year-old calling a mango a flamingo.

But I wonder if this inability to mature in our contextual understanding is a bit like what has happened regarding some statements from or attributed to the Bible. One Christian misunderstands a text, it goes viral, and one day, I’m at the store and see a sign that says, “Flamingos: 99 cents!”

It’s easy to change a sign. But is it as easy to reinterpret some notoriously misunderstood texts?

## 1. “GOD WON’T GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE!”

Sometimes, a stranger or friend who hopes to offer encouragement will tell my friend Laura, “Well, you know God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Jonathan, Laura’s third child, was born premature and lived his first five months in the NICU. Since then, he’s spent more time in the hospital than many septuagenarians. Laura honestly tells me, “I have *definitely* been given more than I can handle.”

The oft-quoted statement “God won’t give you more than you can handle” isn’t actually in

the Bible. Rather, it's a misquoting of 1 Corinthians 10:13. Here is the passage in context:

If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

So, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.

Paul's passage is specifically about the problem of temptation, not suffering.

### ***Not the Gatekeeper of Suffering***

There is something appealing about the idea that our suffering or trials *could* be worse but that God holds it back. The problem with imagining more than you could handle and then being thankful that you don't actually have *that* much is it undermines real suffering and struggle (like Laura's and Jonathan's), and it casts God as the Gatekeeper of Suffering. To put our own circumstances into perspective, we might say, "It could be worse"—and then we think of images we've seen of starving children or of homes flattened by hurricanes. But in the process, we negate both our own story and the stories of others.

Christian hope is not hope because things could always be worse. Christian hope lies in the past, present, and future work of Jesus Christ! This hope is in the good work God has done through Christ and the Holy Spirit, not God's work in holding back the reigns on our suffering.

Jesus spoke of God as a loving father, who gives **good gifts** to his children. Parenting isn't about pushing our children to the limit all the time! While a parent has some control over the negative circumstances her children may face, being the gatekeeper to suffering is not primarily what parenting is about.

Good parents relate to their children, they love them, they enjoy them. Our heavenly Father is with us, loves us, and gives us *good gifts*! Though God uses suffering, pain, and sickness, these are not burdens God piles upon us until we're a step away from breaking. Mysteriously, it is in the midst of suffering that we may find ourselves more aware of God's presence and goodness, as Laura told me: "God does not abandon us when we do not succeed. Instead, he upholds us."

And it's this upholding, this strengthening, that reminds me of another oft-quoted sentence from Scripture that is just as often misunderstood.

### **2. "I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME."**

This sentence is frequently bandied about as a Christian superhero motto. "All things" sounds pretty awesome. There's lots of "all things" I'd like to do through Christ who strengthens me: be an amazing dancer (I'm not), play in a rock band (I don't), and have successfully made it into an MFA program when I was 23 (I didn't).

In the book of Philippians, the apostle Paul wrote a very famous sentence, surrounded by

many lesser-known sentences. Here it is, in context. Remember: Paul is writing this letter of friendship from prison.

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.

Here we see Paul remembering the extremes of his life: the times he has had much or little. It's within the contrasts of life that Paul remembers Christ is sufficient in every situation. [Gordon Fee](#) notes that this is one of many passages "that indicate the absolute Christ-centeredness of Paul's whole life. He is a 'man in Christ.' As such he takes what Christ brings. If it means 'plenty,' he is a man in Christ, and that alone; if it means 'want,' he is still a man in Christ, and he accepts deprivation as part of his understanding of discipleship."

#### ***It's Not About Us***

This passage really isn't about what we accomplish (or, in turn, don't accomplish). It's about our identities in Christ. If we were reading this aloud together, the word to emphasize is *Christ*, not *I* or *me*. This is about being in Christ: rich or poor, clumsy or graceful, cool or nerdy, extra-talented or marginally talented. Our identity isn't in "all things" that we do or don't do. "All things" don't matter as much as we like to think. It's all about Christ. If we find our identities in Christ, our own whims or dreams of success don't matter so much anymore!

Perhaps, though, some of the most misunderstood statements are the ones that seem pretty clear cut, such as . . .

### 3. "DON'T JUDGE."

In Matthew 7:1 (and also in Luke 6:37), Jesus says, "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged." This phrase is often used as a jabbing weapon in conversations about morals or admonishment. But it *seems* clear, right? Some may think it means this: "Do not judge; do not infringe on people's freedoms. And if you do, you will be judged by God, even more harshly than if you had not judged at all." But is this what Jesus was talking about?

What's fascinating about Jesus' teaching is that he follows a very heavy comment ("For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you," 7:2, NIV) with a pointed joke:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let



me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. (Matthew 7:3–5, NIV)

This passage about judgment is embedded in the Sermon on the Mount which, Matthew **points out**, was primarily directed toward Jesus’ disciples. And as he used humorous hyperbole to clarify, his teaching about judgment isn’t primarily about strangers judging one another; it’s about *brothers* (disciples) judging one another. Rather than undermining Scripture’s consistent teachings about **morality** and **accountability**, fundamentally, Jesus’ words here are directions for how his followers are to relate to each other in an intimate community of God.

#### ***For Living in Community***

When living or working in community, it’s easy to become frustrated and irritated with those that surround us. Sometimes personalities clash or we have different understandings of a situation. It is within these moments that I may begin to silently judge another’s faults. Then, after I have bolstered my complaint with several pop-psychology books (likely written about said culprit) and made a list of the infractions to prove I am right, I am ready to get down to business and get out that speck that is ruining everything for everyone, especially me.

What we forget, though, is that sometimes when others irritate or frustrate us, it may be our own problem. For example, my brother-in-law is a wonderful man, but when we go somewhere, he is always late—and it irritates me to no end. But as I have gotten to know Ben, I have learned that he has a different understanding of time than I do. He does a task until it is finished and this is how he shows his love. And my own “get-er-done” nature is the log in my eye as I tend to prioritize “productivity” or “punctuality” over people.

We’re not to judge others because that breaks community. Jesus calls us to first examine ourselves. And when we honestly examine ourselves, God’s Spirit illuminates our own ridiculousness and lovingly invites us to restoration.

#### **EMBRACING SCRIPTURE**

As Christians we have a special relationship with the Bible because we believe that it is God’s Word to us. We love Scripture and embrace its power in our lives. Yet because God spoke the Bible to a particular people and place, a context very distant from ours, the Bible can easily be misunderstood. Learning to understand the context of biblical passages is a critical part of spiritual maturity. Thankfully, we can all exchange our flamingos for mangos. ●

Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence is a TCW regular contributor. A writer, biblical storyteller, MDiv student, and elder at Thornapple Covenant Church, Joy is the mother of two children and lives with her family in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She can be found at [PathlightStories.com](http://PathlightStories.com).





# My Double Life as a Secret Addict

*I was afraid of being found out, but then grace found me.* | **HELEN CORONATO**

I've always wanted to be liked.

No, that's not exactly true.

I've always wanted to be your *favorite*. Everyone's favorite. All the time.

I could quickly read people and become the friend they were looking for, editing my likes and dislikes in accordance with their opinions. I could be funny, serious, the star, second fiddle, whatever the situation called for. I preferred being the person you wanted me to be rather than risk being myself. Why? Because I knew if you discovered the depth of my addictions, you'd be revolted. You'd recoil. You'd leave.

I had a wonderful husband, beautiful home, successful career, and new car. My carefully crafted image had to be upheld, precarious though it was. I hid my shameful secrets for years, until the pain of living with addiction became worse than the fear of others finding out about my addiction. There, in that tiny crack of grace, I somehow found enough courage to ask for help.

## THESE PEOPLE ARE LOSERS

When I went to my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, I drove around the block three times and then parked out of sight. Still, 11 years later, I can't believe I actually walked through the door. I had a crippling addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography, shopping, and

prescriptions, and I could not believe that anyone—*anyone*—had ever done the despicable things I had done.

To cope, I looked for all of the ways I was different from the people sitting in the group, counting them off in my head: *She's way worse than I am. I never did that. I cannot believe she is wearing overalls. Who wears overalls? Get it together, lady.*

The Enemy wanted me to leave and distracted me from getting healthy with such self-righteous thinking: *These people are losers. If I stay here, I'll become a loser too.*

After weeks of treating meetings like a social event where my primary purpose was to be the prettiest girl in the recovery room, I realized I had stopped drinking, but not much else had changed. I was still an emotional train wreck. Another woman with plenty of sober time took mercy on me, pulled me aside, and offered me life-changing insight. "Stop comparing your story to theirs and start identifying their feelings with yours," she told me. "There is a difference between 'not drinking' and 'living sober.' Now come sit next to me."

I did.

### GETTING HONEST

For the first time, I really started listening. I quickly recognized that I wasn't that different from the other men and women in the group. No, I had never driven drunk with my kids in the car like one of the other women, but it was because I hadn't had children yet, not because I was such an upstanding drunk! If I fell back into alcohol and drugs I know I probably would—even today—drive drunk with my kids. It breaks my heart to even write that sentence, but it's the truth.

It is only because other people in recovery revealed their deepest darkest secrets that I know where the depths of my drinking could take me if I chose to use again, even after all of these years. I learned not to look down my nose at the mom who could have killed her kids, but instead to thank her for her honesty. Her transparency means I, too, don't have to hide my secrets. Together, we can support, encourage, and keep each other on a sober path. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Me too!" is how I feel at meetings today.

No matter who you are or what you've done, it is possible to break free.

But you can't do it alone.

### HE MET ME

We are designed to live in community—we're even designed to suffer in community. Jesus wasn't crucified in a private valley away from prying eyes, but instead on a hill in plain sight. He wanted to make sure we knew he understood the depths of human suffering and despair—that pain is not the end of the story.

Jesus met me exactly where I was: standing on the corner of desperation and despair, a drink in my hand, when he whispered, *This isn't working.*

I didn't "get myself together" before he granted me mercy. How could I? I had a God-shaped hole I kept trying to fill with alcohol, drugs, porn, shopping, food, and fantasy when

the only thing that would ever fit there was God. He set the wheels of recovery into motion, even though it took me years to give him the credit. I wish I had known sooner that I could cry out, “Jesus, I am so ashamed! I am in so much pain! I am so afraid!” instead of trying to fix myself with another [self-help](#) book, exercise, philosophy, or good intention. I learned the hard way I was too broken to fix myself. I needed help, both human and divine.

### FACING MYSELF ... WITH OTHERS

Over the years I have benefitted from Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, women’s retreats, sponsorship, physicians’ care, and professional therapy. I have learned that if alcoholism is the root of my problem, then food, sex, money, shopping, flirting, lying, and pornography are its branches.

Addiction is about trying to manage self-hatred. Yes, very biological elements play an important part in how and why we end up at the end of our rope, but what every unhealthy behavior has in common is self-loathing. How we choose to comfort ourselves varies, but the pain and shame are parallel. I weighed my addictions against every other facet of my life and could only come to one undeniable conclusion: I was a lost cause. I was in a constant battle between my heart’s cry for help and my mind’s demand for silence. I needed people who understood how to live sober, present, and functioning one day at a time, and who could teach me to do the same.

### HOPE FOR THE ONCE HOPELESS

I’d resisted help for so long because the idea of facing my demons was terrifying. But addiction is treatable. There are tools to help you live a happy, healthy life once you name your problems, admit your fear, and ask for help. It’s our secrets that keep us ashamed, scared, and sick! I learned that the first step in shattering our secrets is walking through the doors of a recovery group.

Going to recovery meetings gave me the relief of knowing other “normal” women and men who shared the same struggles. These strangers could articulate all the things I had been feeling for years but had no words to express. Sitting in group therapy, I found the kinship I had always longed for. My incomprehensible feelings finally had a language, as well as a system of strategies I could use to deal with my addictions, obsessions, fear, and shame. Strangers had offered me the homecoming that had eluded me my whole life.

There will never be enough alcohol, food, sex, or shopping to cure what ails me. I cannot fix my childhood, bring my parents back from the dead, or repair the irreparable with a gin and tonic (or 20). But there is hope for the once-hopeless me. It has been possible to change. It is possible for me, and you, to live a life that is happy, joyous, and free.




## My Double Life as a Secret Addict

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I'm not downplaying anyone's personal pain or struggle. Facing addiction and seeking help is *not easy*. But I don't want anyone to die, as I was so close to doing, from a self-diagnosed case of terminal "uniqueness." All you need is to want to get better just a little more than you want to die. There, grace will appear.

Helen Coronato is a TCW regular contributor as well as a non-fiction author and a homeschooling mom of two boys. Check out her projects and connect at [HelenCoronato.com](http://HelenCoronato.com).



A portrait of Jo Saxton, a Black woman with her hair styled in braids, smiling warmly. She is wearing a teal top and a necklace with yellow and white beads. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a stone wall and greenery.

● Interview

# When it's Hard to Call God “Father”

*For Jo Saxton, growing to know God as Father meant a long journey of forgiveness.* | **INTERVIEW BY KELLI B. TRUJILLO**

*TCW [advisor](#) Jo Saxton co-pastors [Mission Point Church](#) in the Twin Cities with her husband and serves as Chair of the Board for [3D Movements](#), a global discipleship ministry. A mom of two, Jo is a sought-after speaker and the author of several books including *More Than Enchanting*. I connected with Jo to hear more about her journey of healing, forgiveness, and faith.*

***When you spoke at the [IF:Gathering](#) this year, you shared how having an absent father deeply impacted your faith and sense of self. What was it like as you grew up?***

My parents are Nigerian and I was born in London, England. They split up before I was born—my dad moved back to Nigeria, my mom stayed in England. It was a broken situation, and I spent the first six years of my life in foster care.

I became a Christian when I was nine, but the “God the Father” part of my faith seemed irrelevant because, to me, a “father” was someone who walked away.

I never even met my dad until I was 12 years old. I met him again when I was 15, and at that point I was deeply aware of the pain of it all. As a teenager, I poignantly felt what I’d lost, what I didn’t get to have. So I thought of Jesus as my Savior and my friend, but the idea of God as Father? It was very painful.

***You've shared that, as an older teenager, you had an experience at a church in which a speaker specifically said that someone in the congregation needed to come to know God as Father—needed to understand God's love in that way. You knew that message was for you. How did that moment change you?***

The Lord really met me and unlocked years of grief. When that person said that God was my Father, it was almost like I was meeting God for the first time.

I knew God and was attuned to his voice, but it was that particular revelation of *God as Father* that I'd never gotten a grip on. But suddenly my life and the idea of God the Father collided. Initially the collision was full of grief and anger and sorrow. I broke down in tears. But I also wondered, "Now what?" I didn't know how to relate to God in that way.

I shared this struggle with my pastor and his wife, and they told me that God was responsible for revealing himself as Father to me—that it wasn't up to me, that God would get through to me. About a week later, I "started over" in my prayers. I said, *Hey God, my name is Jo. I don't know how to do this. I don't know what a father is meant to do or what a father is meant to be. I don't know how to get to know you in this way.*

Another time, when I was 20, I literally talked to God all night long—I started at the beginning and told him every single thing I felt. Every memory, every encounter. When I finished praying that next morning, I knew something had shifted in our relationship.

***How did your relationship with God as "Father" grow and change?***

Much of God's provision for me was through the church as God brought a number of father figures into my life. Initially, I found it very hard to get to know these men because I just didn't have a framework for it. But God used them to somehow give me a glimpse of what God's constancy was like, what God's approval was like, what God's pride in me was like.

I was on a journey of healing with God, but also a journey of forgiveness with my dad. My dad was such a big figure in my life, such an absent figure, such a broken figure. The pain of that relationship still kept creeping into every part of my life.

***So what happened with your dad?***

I was 25 years old the last time I physically saw my dad. I saw him during a mission trip to Nigeria. I met him and chatted with him for a while. He said he'd be around the next day—but he didn't show. I realized I had to come to terms with who he was, which was very hard.

I was at a conference one time and the speaker said you know you've forgiven someone when you can tear up the "IOUs" and they owe you nothing. How could I do that? I felt my dad owed me birthday cards, birthday presents . . . *life* with him. But God said to me, *You have carried this for so long. Give me the expectations of what he owes you and let me fill in the gaps.* I knew I couldn't be fully free unless I could forgive my dad—but it happened through degrees of forgiveness.



Eventually I wrote my dad a letter. I essentially told him, "You're off the hook. You don't have to write me any more if you don't want to. You don't have to do anything anymore. I feel like the Lord's telling me to let you go. So if you want to stay in touch, that's fine—but if you don't, that's fine." He wrote back to me and said, "If that's what your God is like, then I want to know more about your God."

In 2008 he had been ill, so my siblings and I sent him some money for the bills. He asked to talk to me, but I was going to put off the phone call for a few weeks. But I suddenly had this thought, *No, call him now*. So I called him and he shouted, "Jo, is that you?" I said, "Yes," and he started sobbing and sobbing and sobbing.

I said, "Look, you need to know we're at peace. All is forgiven, all is forgotten." He thanked me but kept sobbing. I asked him, "You're not at peace, are you?" and he said no.

I told him, "Jesus is the only one who is going to give you peace. The most important thing in your life right now is that you make your peace with God." We prayed together and I was able to lead him to the Lord.

He died about two weeks later.

***So many women struggle with a need to forgive something that's been done to them—so many need healing. For you, did healing happen first, enabling you to forgive your dad? Or did you need to forgive your dad first in order to experience healing?***

I first chose to forgive my dad when I was 16, but I was 34 when he died—and only then did the forgiveness feel complete. So it was a forgiveness 18 years in the making.

I think, for me, the *healing* began first. We love because Christ [first loved us](#). I actually don't think God asked anything of me in terms of my dad. It wasn't like, "You need to forgive because it's the right thing to do." Instead, God showed me, *For the sake of your own freedom, forgiveness is an integral part of your healing*.

It's hard to forgive when you know the other person isn't going to change. For me, there was a grief and a sorrow in the midst of the forgiveness. I felt, *I'm giving you so much—I'm laying my all down here, and it means nothing to you. It's irrelevant to you because you don't think you did anything wrong*.

So every degree of forgiveness was a choice—not a feeling. Yet every choice to forgive wrought a degree of healing with it. In his mercy, God helped me understand that forgiveness didn't mean I was saying what happened was okay. On the contrary! In fact, it was so *not okay* that Jesus went to the cross on our behalf.

When God is inviting me to forgive, what is actually on the table? Ultimately, forgiveness is entering into what Christ has won for me—for us—on the cross.

***What does God's fatherly role in your life mean to you today?***

Today, God being my Father means he is close by. He is always there, he is very present. In

him, I feel secure—and I've been able to weather some hard things lately because I know I am safe. I know where I belong. When he leads me to take risks or do something that feels overwhelming, I feel like I'm standing right on his hand. And when I mess up, I know he's there waiting. He has helped me settle into my own skin. I know who I am because I know *whose* I am.



Kelli B. Trujillo is editor of *Today's Christian Woman*. Follow her on Twitter at [@kbtrujillo](https://twitter.com/kbtrujillo) and [@TWomancom](https://twitter.com/TWomancom).



● Cover Story

# The New Face of Infidelity

*What lures Christians to cheat?* | CORRIE CUTRER

If you're among the many couples who feel like you're barely hanging on in marriage, the sobering truth is that you're not alone. Particularly if cheating is involved.

At least 60 percent of married couples will experience infidelity at some point in their marriage, says [Dr. Willard F. Harley, Jr.](#), a licensed psychologist in Minnesota and author of the best-selling book *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*.

All kinds of reasons exist for this, many of which sound textbook in their familiarity—couples experience periods of sustained stress, exhaustion, or separation due to family needs or career obligations. Husbands and wives don't feel satisfied with each other or deeply connected. People endure longstanding dullness or even deadness in their relationships. Men and women wrestle with boredom, loneliness or unmet needs. Life feels tedious and hard, and a titillating experience beckons.

## A KINDER WAY OF CHEATING?

Unfortunately, knowing in theory all the right answers when it comes to why people cheat hasn't stopped unfaithfulness from occurring. As the wake from the Ashley Madison scandal has shown us, the culture at large is confused when it comes to how we approach infidelity. Websites such as OpenMinded.com have introduced the concept of ethical cheating, asking us to consider a kinder way of infidelity where couples can engage in "open relationships" that involve telling a spouse you are going to be unfaithful or including the spouse in new,



outside-the-marriage relationships. Additionally, a recent *Time* magazine article posed the question, “Is monogamy over?” to a group of newsmakers, all who gave varying views (including a plea for legalized polygamy).

In a large online survey, 68 percent of women said they’d have an affair if they thought they could avoid getting caught, says [Dave Carder](#), a licensed marriage and family therapist in California and author of several books on marriage and infidelity. Increasingly, it seems like personal integrity is taking a backseat to fear of exposure.

### SEXLESS MARRIAGE?

Within Christian circles, where strict monogamy is publicly lauded, our private sexual ethics have nonetheless become clouded. Consider the porn factor. Millennials have grown up in a culture where the average age for children to be first exposed to pornography has crept younger and younger (today it’s at age 11). By high school, 90 percent of boys are regularly viewing porn, says [Laura Gallier](#), author of several books for children and teens on sexuality. Additionally, an unofficial poll among Rice University students revealed one in five females says she is addicted to pornography, Gallier says.

“For married couples where one or both people bring into the relationship a past experience with porn, sex has turned into a nasty thing,” says Cheryl Scruggs, co-founder with her husband, Jeff, of [Hope Matters Marriage Ministries](#) in Texas.

Ironically, Scruggs and her husband work with many young couples in their twenties who are in crisis at large partly because of sexless marriages. A struggle with porn kept the couple from having sex, only to either lead to estrangement within the marriage or to one person looking outside the marriage for sexual fulfillment in the arms of someone else or toward the continued use of porn.

### THE CHANGING FACE OF INFIDELITY

The coming of age of Millennials, in fact, has introduced a new wave of cultural realities that have impacted the causes of infidelity throughout the past 15 to 20 years.

Take, for instance, the fact that young women married seven years or less are one of the fastest growing demographic groups committing adultery. These are women who either didn’t grow up with a dad in the home or never had a healthy relationship with their father or stepfather. “They’ve never had a male mentor,” says Carder. “So there is a huge hole in most of these women’s hearts. A man comes along—many times an older man—and begins listening to them, and they just cave.”

Among both Millennials and Gen Xers, Carder points out, another reality is that 50 percent of this married demographic are children of divorce. “They haven’t seen a model or a practice of healthy, lasting marriages set before them,” Carder says. “If it gets bad, you cut and run.” They also carry with them attachment injuries from a mom or dad who abandoned them or broke up the family. Carder notes that these injuries demonstrate



themselves in a marriage in three ways—the spouse either becomes too clingy, too cautious (afraid to get too close because they might get hurt), or too chaotic (too restless to be tied down or commit long-term).

Within Christian communities, it's also striking to note that relationships among young marrieds are particularly fragile during the early years of starting a family. (Fifty percent of all first-time affairs by husbands occur while the wife is pregnant or during the first year after delivery, Carder notes.)

Millennials, who are entering marriage in their late twenties or early thirties, are also now doing so with much more extensive sexual histories (an average of five or six past partners). This places weighty expectations of sexual satisfaction on their married partner that the relationship cannot often sustain.

"Many of these past sexual experiences were physical infatuations," Carder says. "And when you're infatuated, it's like sex on cocaine. Marital sex never compares over time with that. Never."

Instead of learning to stoke the fires of healthy sexual tension (flirting, teasing, and enjoying the slow build-up that leads to fulfilling sex), these couples are coming into marriage with a past mindset that said: *Sex is about hopping into bed as soon as possible. This might never happen again, so I better take advantage of it right now.* So sex within marriage quickly becomes a chore.

Social media has also flung open the door wide to the ease in which people can engage in emotional affairs. Old infatuations can be instantly triggered through connecting with past boyfriends or girlfriends. "Those former experiences and feelings are still stored in the brain," Carder says. "A man might see a woman on Facebook that he liked in college. It doesn't matter if she's put on 80 pounds. It's the memory she generates. He desires connection with her."

### AN UNEXPECTED INSTINCT

It was Scruggs' own difficult journey through infidelity that led her and her husband to create a ministry focused on helping other couples find healing and hope for their broken marriages.

Scruggs, now 57, says the life she led with her husband after they first married in their mid-twenties seemed picturesque. Living in Los Angeles at the time, they both had great jobs, a beautiful home, and money for anything they desired. Yet she felt empty. "I didn't really feel like I knew my husband," she recalls. "I didn't feel like I knew his heart. I was lonely and dying inside."

She thought having children might be the answer, and after fertility treatments the couple had twin girls. "I was okay for a little while; then that gnawing hole in my heart returned," she says.

When the twins were 16 months old, Scruggs traveled for work to a national sales meeting, where she connected with a male colleague whom she'd known for a long time professionally. "I wasn't looking to get out of my marriage at all," she says. "I wasn't looking to

cheat. I just wasn't that kind of person."

Scruggs and her colleague talked late into the night and he asked her to breakfast the next morning before the meeting concluded. "Of course I replied no," she says. "But somehow I found myself at the table with him the following morning. I felt really connected to him. I flew home on a Friday and found myself thinking over the weekend, *I can't wait to get back to the office on Monday to talk on the phone to this guy.*"

They began communicating regularly over the phone. A month later, the two met at a hotel and slept together.

While Scruggs' actions were shocking to herself, they fit a pattern of what often unfolds during an adulterous affair. "The vast majority of affairs—I'd say 95 percent—occur without planning or intent," Harley says. "Affairs usually start with a friendship. You find yourself attracted to another person, not necessarily sexually. You just like the person. You get along really well. Then one thing leads to another and eventually you develop an attraction and the affair becomes sexual."

Harley frequently counsels couples facing infidelity, and the injured spouse is always bewildered by how his or her partner could have entered into a sexual relationship with someone else. Harley's answer is always the same: "Because we're wired for it," he says. "We have an instinct to sexually connect. And our instincts will lead us into a whole lot of trouble if we don't take extraordinary precautions."

The precautionary measure Harley most strongly emphasizes is that married individuals should not have close personal relationships with people of the opposite sex. "This person shouldn't become your buddy or someone who's going to be there for you when you need a sympathetic ear or help with a favor," he says.

Quite often, it's those kind of friendships that can quickly blossom into emotional affairs, Carder adds. "Men and women are working together, serving together, going to the gym together, and practicing hobbies and interests together more than ever before," he says. "With these kind of relationships, I often see people move from what I describe as 'external professional' to an 'internal personal' relationship. And when you step over that threshold, you're entering into risky business."

For someone who's wondering if they've entered into an emotional affair, Carder offers these introspective questions: Has this become a mood-altering experience for you? Does seeing this person or receiving a text or tweet from them improve your mood? Are you dressing in ways to get noticed? Are you engaging in personal conversations? Are you also trying to hide or deny those communications, knowing that if someone realized how much the relationship was having an effect on you, you'd be in trouble?

Harley says he's received plenty of flak from others who say his strong stance against opposite-sex friendships is a ridiculously strict idea. "My response is this: If you were to have an affair, it would be the most devastating experience in your spouse's life," he says. "It rises to the level of losing a child, of having your house burn down, or of losing a limb. It's that bad. So for something that devastating, extraordinary precautions are reasonable."

In the wake of Scruggs' infidelity, this kind of devastation hit her family head on. She



divorced her husband without ever telling him the true reason she was leaving. He begged her not to do it, but she was bent on pursuing a new life with another man.

In hindsight, Scruggs says she felt as if she became two different people. “I never considered myself capable of having an affair. I kept thinking, *What in the world am I doing? This isn't me!* Yet I just kept going down that path. I was so deceived. I thought this guy was my soulmate and the answer to all my problems.”

Scruggs went so far as to begin looking at engagement rings with the other man. But the first time she arranged a get-together with him and her daughters, something didn't feel right. She had started attending church, and three months after her divorce was finalized, she had a radical encounter with Christ and became a Christian. She'd grown up in church but realized she never entered into a personal relationship with God.

### THE AFTERMATH

The scales soon fell off her eyes and she realized what she'd done to her marriage and her family. “I thought there would be relief on the other side of divorce, but it was a disaster,” she says.

Harley says this kind of realization is common at some point after an affair occurs. “It's a catastrophe for the whole family,” he says.

This in part plays a role in why 95 to 98 percent of affairs do not last, Harley asserts. “They die a natural death, understandably, because it's something that's been done in secret and it's done great harm to your spouse and children,” Harley says. “People end up feeling guilty and that generally has a negative effect on the affair itself.” (He notes that for the 5 percent of affairs that do end up leading to marriage, only 30 percent of those relationships survive for five years).

In the aftermath of their divorce, Scruggs' former husband, Jeff, remained deeply wounded by his wife's unfaithfulness. He was doubtful and guarded when Scruggs' first approached him with a letter she read aloud, confessing her story and asking him for forgiveness. They began to try to live amicably while co-parenting their daughters. Scruggs said she prayed for several years without ever knowing if reconciliation would be possible. Slowly, it began to happen as their hearts were turned toward one another again. Seven years after divorcing, they remarried.

“The difference between our first and second marriage was an understanding that a deep, personal, intimate relationship with Christ must come first,” Scruggs says. “That led to greater intimacy between the two of us. Before we just talked about surface things and we didn't go deep into each other's hearts. But we learned what it meant to nurture our relationship through vulnerability with each other, flaws and all.”

The idea that cheating offers escape, relief, and lasting pleasure is heaping loads of turmoil on marriages today. At the end of the road, the truth to be discovered about infidelity is the same of all paths that lead us away from the light. In darkness we lose ourselves. Deceit overwhelms. We forget who we are and to whom we belong: Christ our beloved. If we'll listen, he will gently remind us that there is a thief who comes to steal, kill,

and destroy marriages. But he comes that we may have life and have it abundantly. ●



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# The Unhappiest Year of My Life

*The high (and holy) cost of motherhood* | ANN SWINDELL

Everything about having a baby is touted as happy: the rounding belly, the cute maternity clothes, the baby showers, the adorable tiny clothes.

Yes, pregnancy can be difficult for some women (for me it was very hard), but the overarching sentiment is that having a baby is an amazing, wonderful thing. *And it truly is.* The miracle of life, the gift of a child, the hope of a growing family—these are all amazing, wonderful things. Beautiful things. Happy things, even. But for me, the first year of my daughter’s life wasn’t very happy.

Actually, it was the unhappiest year of my life.

I knew that having a child would change things; many of my friends had already become parents, and I had watched them go from women with time for coffee dates and professional lives to moms who were worn out and frazzled. I didn’t expect the transition to parenthood to be easy. I didn’t expect that I would sleep much or that I would have a lot of extra time.

Still, I *did* expect to be happy. I thought that having a baby—a baby that we’d hoped and prayed for—would bring happiness in the midst of sleep deprivation and the transition into life as parents.

But I wasn’t happy; at least not for a good while. Don’t get me wrong—I was thankful. Ella and I were both healthy, I loved her immensely, and seeing my husband as a father was

incredible. But the combination of exhaustion, the lack of time for myself, the shift in my identity to becoming a mother, the change in our marriage relationship, and the depth of responsibility I felt for my daughter, all combined with those powerful postpartum hormones, left me feeling very, very unhappy.

I missed my old life. It's not that I didn't want to be Ella's mom; I loved her more than I thought was possible. But I missed the freedom and rest that I realized I would never get back. I missed being able to put myself first, something that felt increasingly impossible. I missed who I was, and I had the realization that I was never going to be that woman again.

### A SHARED EXPERIENCE

Women don't always talk about it, but many are unhappy—to some degree—during that first year of motherhood. The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, Germany **recently reported** that the “drop in happiness experienced by parents after the birth of a first child was larger than the experience of unemployment, divorce, or the death of a partner.” Similarly, an **earlier study** published in Great Britain noted that “parents often report statistically significantly lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and mental well-being compared with non-parents.”

Here's what some other moms told me about their first year of motherhood:

“I wanted adult conversation. Because I was doing the same routine every day, I felt my intelligence and self-esteem diminishing.”

“Having no time to myself and being utterly sleep deprived brought out bitter anger that I'd never dealt with before and was without tools to deal with.”

“I was terribly caught off guard by how my relationship with my husband changed. I suddenly had experiences and a life he couldn't relate to.”

“I lost any desire for sex because of the fatigue and the physical and hormonal changes.”

Additionally, for many new moms, the shift in their spiritual life—on top of and because of all of the other changes—can cause a great deal of unhappiness. One mom remembers that she “found it completely impossible to pray because [her] mind simply would not stop buzzing with so many things.” Time for a devotional life can dwindle down to nothing, and emotional and hormonal changes can send us into a dark spiral of depression.

So the drop in happiness, the loss of identity and adult interaction, the lack of sleep and energy, the change in our marriages and even our relationship with God—these are high costs that most mothers pay time and time again in the early years of child-rearing. So why have children? Are mothers giving themselves over to a life of exhaustion and self-loss?



### THE COST OF MOTHERHOOD

In some ways, the answer is yes. Yes, every mother (and father, albeit in different ways) gives herself over to a life of exhaustion and self-loss. The cost is very real and, at times, very painful. And still, we have a model who taught us about the surprising gift we can receive through exhaustion and self-loss: Jesus.

Jesus was, undoubtedly, exhausted at times by his ministry on earth ([Mark 4:37-39](#)), and all of his life was aimed at the supreme act of self-loss for the sake of those he loved through his death on the cross. But does that mean that as mothers, we are called to give up everything too?

No, not in the same way Jesus did. We are not the Savior of our children—Christ is. We are not supposed to find our identity or value in our children—that is found only in Christ. We are not asked to find our value in our role as moms—our value is in who Jesus says we are, not in what we do. But the way of Christ is the call to pick up our cross and lay down our life ([Matthew 16:24-26](#)), and for many of us, mothering will reveal the depths of that call like nothing else. We will be asked to lay aside our immediate desires for the sake of our children's well-being and growth. We will be asked to consider one little life—or many little lives—as more important than our own ([Philippians 2:3-4](#)). And we will feel the loss of self in new, often painful ways—sometimes in ways that make us very unhappy.

### THE GIFT IN THE STRUGGLE

Yet, there is a deeper joy that goes beyond the cost of our unhappiness: the gift of sufficiency in Christ. For Christ himself tells us that “whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25, *ESV*). In our weakness, pain, and sorrow, we are offered the gift of Christ's strength: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9, *ESV*). In the places where, as mothers, it often feels most like we are losing our own lives—losing our freedom, our time, our sleep, our energy—we have the opportunity to find our lives through the sufficiency of Christ as we rely on him for everything. One mom put it this way: “Being a mom drove me to my knees in helplessness before God, which in the long run did a great deal of good in me.”

So while having a child may make us “unhappier,” perhaps that is not a bad thing. Perhaps the gift of getting to experience Christ's strength in our weakness—letting the struggle of motherhood reveal our reliance upon him—perhaps these are the very things that will lead us into joy that runs deeper than fleeting happiness. I know it has for me. I don't always feel thrilled about the responsibilities that I carry as a mother, and I don't usually feel happy about being exhausted. Still, I've never felt more joyful than when I'm holding my daughter in my arms, aware that my loving heavenly Father—who sees me, cares for me, and knows my needs—is holding me too. ●

Ann Swindell is a TCW regular contributor who is passionate about seeing women set free by the love of Christ. Connect with her at [AnnSwindell.com](#), on [Facebook](#), or on Twitter at [@annswindell](#).

their physical and emotional needs. In a fallen world, though, many parents—who may love their children desperately—aren't able to provide all a child needs.

So to every caring adult who shepherded those of us in that gap—both in the womb and outside of it—we thank you.

You were so brave.

You were so powerful.

You were so wise.

You were so fierce.

You were so gracious.

You were so generous.

*Thank you.* ●



● Cover Story

# Why Are Women Leaving the Church?

*The reasons behind the exodus* | **ROXANNE STONE**

For five years, we met every week for Bible study but rarely attended church.

From about 2002 to 2007, our small group formed a tightknit group who “did life” together. We hung out on weekends, vacationed, and a few of us even worked at the same Christian publisher. Once a week, we’d gather in a home to cook a meal and settle in for some good old-fashioned exegesis. We were all Christians with a church background of some sort, and we were serious about faith. But in the absence of church, we became “church” for one another. At least, that’s what we told ourselves.

Cue the various Millennial tropes:

*I’m spiritual but not religious.*

*I encounter God in nature.*

*My friends are my church.*

*I love Jesus but not the church.*

The hubris of youth and a well-educated, entrepreneurial, “you can do anything”

upbringing convinced us we could manage our own spiritual growth. And our formative years in evangelical church culture had taught us that *our personal relationship with Jesus* was the thing that mattered most. The church was, in our minds, intended to buoy that personal faith. If we weren't "being fed" at a church, we were free, if not duty-bound, to look elsewhere.

Since our small group spiritually nourished us, we thought little about what we might be missing each Sunday: sacraments, intergenerational community, authority. Besides, we could always download a sermon podcast if we wanted one.

I believed our story was an isolated one at the time. Today—from my perch as a researcher and journalist in the religious space—I now realize we were not alone in our angsty redefinitions of the well-lived Christian life. Countless Gen-Xers, Millennials, and post-9/11 20somethings had grown skeptical of institutions and hungry for "authentic" community.

According to Barna Group, nearly 6 in 10 20somethings who grew up in the church have dropped out at some point. Church attendance decreases with every generation and, among Millennials, continues to fall. In 2004 (shortly after our small group started), 44 percent of Millennials had not been to church in the past six months. Today, that has risen to 55 percent.<sup>1</sup>

But that wasn't the only aspect of my small group that corresponded to a broader trend: we were comprised of more than half *women*.

Historically, men have been less likely to regularly attend church than women. That gender gap peaked in 2003, when 60 percent of unchurched people were men, before it began steadily closing. Today, only 54 percent of the unchurched are men. In other words, the gender gap has narrowed from 20 points to just 8 points.

Why are women leaving church? It is the case that they are *leaving*—the majority (85 percent) of these unchurched women are essentially *de-churched*. It's not that these women never went to church in the first place, but rather, that at one point they decided church was no longer for them.

### WHAT IS MY PLACE IN CHURCH?

While [Erin Lane](#) never fully dropped out of church, her attendance for many years as a 20something was spotty. She never could quite come to the point of committing to one church—even the one where her husband was a pastor. Author of the recently released, [Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe](#), Lane points out that women's decrease in church attendance is in line with a drop (or delay) in other traditional social bindings. "Women are delaying marriage and children, two things that have historically strengthened young people of both genders' relationship to the church," she says. "So our reluctance to be 'tied down' to people naturally affects our reluctance to be tied down to a place."

Aside from delaying marriage and children, young adults are eschewing other forms of "settling down" as well, such as long-term careers. They are more prone to regularly switching jobs (and, with that, often locales); 9 in 10 Millennials expect to stay in a single job less than



three years.<sup>2</sup> In other words, there are very few institutions—either social or economical—binding Millennials. In a recent Barna Group [study on identity](#), Millennials were significantly less likely than other generations to claim any of the surveyed factors (family, faith, country, city, state, ethnicity, career) as central to their identity.

This generational sense of disenfranchisement has not helped draw young adults in general to a church—let alone women, among whom such societal untetheredness is unprecedented. “As women have begun to catch up with men in our privilege to choose—choosing when and how to have children, choosing when and where to move, choosing what and how we will make a living—it makes sense that we’d also experience the same decreasing sense of interdependency that has anthropologically been the disposition of men,” says Lane.

Additionally, Lane points out, women have been gaining ground in every arena of society: economically, in their careers, at school. They have a new sense of vocational agency—something the church hasn’t always encouraged in women. “With more education, women have had more opportunities afforded to them to contribute to the public good,” she says. “What was different (or better) about using my gifts in a church than, say, in my work as a retreat facilitator for clergy or in the feminist writer community of which I was a part? As a young woman, I often felt a greater sense of personal voice and agency in my work outside the church than I did within its walls. Often I wouldn’t think twice about scheduling a work trip or speaking gig at least one or two weekends a month because those creative outlets felt more life giving to me and the people I served than attending church.”

[Jennifer Bailey](#), a recently ordained minister and the founder and executive director of the Faith Matters Network, observes that even seminaries are keying into this desire among young adults to “do ministry” outside of the traditional four walls of the church. She says that only about a third of the students at her seminary (Vanderbilt University Divinity School) were planning on going into traditional ministry positions at a local church. The other third were studying to go into the nonprofit sector and a final third into academics. “Seminaries are finding ministry to manifest in different ways that don’t involve, at all times, people preaching from a pulpit on Sunday morning,” says Bailey. “So for those of us who stay in these institutional structures, there’s also an openness and desire to push the boundaries of what 21st century ministry looks like. Because the institutions as they have existed for all these years clearly aren’t working.”

### HOW DOES CHURCH FIT INTO MY LIFE?

These massive changes—the delaying of family, an increase in institutional skepticism, and the separation of individuals from traditional social structures—are sufficient to affect church attendance. Unfortunately, they also correspond with the great cultural lament of our time: we are [really, really busy](#).

According to Barna Group research done for the book [Wonder Women](#) by Kate Harris, 72 percent of women feel stressed out, 58 percent are tired, and 48 percent say they are overcommitted. The percentages are even higher among moms with kids at home. Nearly 9

in 10 women (88 percent) say they want to improve in at least one area of life—and the area they cite the most (over work, family, and friends)? *Church.*

“Mobility—in the form of work trips, weekend get-a-ways, college reunions, marathon running, you name it—seems to be a big hindrance to young people finding a deep sense of belonging in the church,” says Lane. “For women in particular, there are just so many other compelling things to give our time to that don’t come with veiled moral assumptions about what we can and can’t do because of our gender.”

Renee Coletrane is a senior project manager at an advertising agency in New York City. Originally from the Philadelphia area, she’s lived in New York now for 15 years but only just this year started attending a church in the city. “When I came to New York, in the beginning I’d go home a lot,” she says. “So whenever I went home, I’d visit my parent’s church. But, to be honest, I just never looked for a church here.”

Church was a huge part of Coletrane’s childhood. “I don’t want to be a total stereotype, but the church is the real hardcore center of black families,” she says. “It was always the time on Sundays that our family from all over—our nieces and cousins and aunts and uncles—would come together. And it was all centered around church. So when I say I grew up in church, I really mean that. My parents literally have a pew there. It’s that way to this day.”

But regular church attendance just never seemed to fit into the pace of Coletrane’s life in the city. It’s not that she intentionally left church—it just felt more like a thing she did with her family, when she was home. “It’s weird,” Coletrane says, “I just never really looked for a church or set out to find one.” Instead, she downloaded sermons from Andy Stanley and T. D. Jakes or watched a service online at Bethel. Without a family draw to church—and without a real urgency to find community in New York City—she felt like the aspect of church she might have wanted (the sermons) were easily accessible online. Plus, she could listen to them at a time when it fit in her schedule—at the gym or at night before bed. (Even with the church Coletrane goes to now, she started out by listening to the pastor’s sermons online for more than a year before she began attending regularly.)

It wasn’t until breaking her ankle and being bedridden for months that Coletrane began to sense maybe she was missing something: “When I broke my ankle, I realized I have a lot of fair-weather friends here,” she says. “That hurt my feelings. So when I started going to church, it was amazing to me, to really sit and dwell with people. I’m so used to sitting at dinner parties and everyone is faking it. But people at church were real—sharing their real stuff. And I felt like their stories were genuine and not fake. It’s a safe part of the city, that little church.”

Bailey echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of fostering community in faith institutions. “People are still seeking meaning,” she says. “Christianity for many people is an act of meaning making. What those groups that are growing have managed to do well is to create systems of being together, of belonging and meaning that people want to be a part of.”

## WHAT IF I NO LONGER BELIEVE?

Even during times of absence from or frustration with the church, both Coletrane and Lane remained Christians. They represent the majority of unchurched women; 62 percent of all unchurched women self-identify as Christian, even though they haven't attended a church service in at least six months. However—particularly among younger Christians—the number of those who have not only left the church but have also *left the faith* is growing. Just 46 percent of unchurched Millennial women self-identify as Christian. The number of women who identify as atheist or agnostic has risen from 8 percent in 2000 to 11 percent today.

Jessica Misener, a Millennial who lives in San Francisco and works as the deputy editorial director at Buzz Feed, wrote an article in 2014 about her own exodus from the evangelical church and the faith to which she had subscribed. The article, "[Why I Miss Being a Born-Again Christian](#)," details her time at Yale Divinity School and the ways in which her studies there challenged her beliefs—particularly about the Bible. It was there she began to question the evangelical insistence on scriptural inerrancy, and those questions began to chip away at her confidence. It was the start of a move away from Christianity, toward what she describes as "not so much agnosticism, but ambivalence."

Misener continued to attend church after grad school. She moved to New York City and went to Jay Bakker's Revolution church in Brooklyn. "That was probably my favorite post-evangelical church community," she says. "It was a collection of people like me who'd fallen away from their conservative backgrounds and were trying to figure out how to still maintain some kind of Christian spirituality. No one judged me for saying I no longer had any clue if I even believed in God anymore." Eventually, though, Misener says she started to feel "dishonest" attending any church regularly.

Aside from questions about the Bible, Misener describes a growing uneasiness with evangelicals' "black and white thinking" that seemed to suggest all of life's problems stemmed from people turning their back on God. "But," she says, "when you have gay friends and colleagues who are in loving relationships with their partners, and friends of other faiths or of no faith living happy, contemplative lives, it gets harder to subscribe to a dichotomy of us versus them, of Christians versus non-Christians."

Misener's questions about her faith and her struggles with the church mirror many Millennials'. Nearly 3 in 10 Millennials with a Christian background (29 percent), say they feel forced to choose between their faith and their friends. The same number say they agree that Christians are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths. And almost 4 in 10 (38 percent) say it's been their experience that churches are not accepting of gays and lesbians.

As an editor, I had worked with Misener in the past and was intrigued by her journey—particularly her admission that she missed much about her evangelical experience. I recently caught up with her over email, curious about where she stood now, a few years after the article. "Unfortunately, the apex of my realization that I didn't want to go back to the church were the hateful emails I got after I published my essay on BuzzFeed," she tells me. "Most of the letters I got from Christians were kind, but there were a few really nasty letters. It definitely didn't make me want to go skipping back to the church, clicking my heels."

But, she admits, she remains conflicted about letting that part of her life go. "I do still

Even during times of absence from or frustration with the church, both Coletrane and Lane remained Christians. They represent the majority of unchurched women; 62 percent of all unchurched women self-identify as Christian, even though they haven't attended a church service in at least six months. However—particularly among younger Christians—the number of those who have not only left the church but have also *left the faith* is growing. Just 46 percent of unchurched Millennial women self-identify as Christian. The number of women who identify as atheist or agnostic has risen from 8 percent in 2000 to 11 percent today.

Jessica Misener, a Millennial who lives in San Francisco and works as the deputy editorial director at Buzz Feed, wrote an article in 2014 about her own exodus from the evangelical church and the faith to which she had subscribed. The article, "[Why I Miss Being a Born-Again Christian](#)," details her time at Yale Divinity School and the ways in which her studies there challenged her beliefs—particularly about the Bible. It was there she began to question the evangelical insistence on scriptural inerrancy, and those questions began to chip away at her confidence. It was the start of a move away from Christianity, toward what she describes as "not so much agnosticism, but ambivalence."

Misener continued to attend church after grad school. She moved to New York City and went to Jay Bakker's Revolution church in Brooklyn. "That was probably my favorite post-evangelical church community," she says. "It was a collection of people like me who'd fallen away from their conservative backgrounds and were trying to figure out how to still maintain some kind of Christian spirituality. No one judged me for saying I no longer had any clue if I even believed in God anymore." Eventually, though, Misener says she started to feel "dishonest" attending any church regularly.

Aside from questions about the Bible, Misener describes a growing uneasiness with evangelicals' "black and white thinking" that seemed to suggest all of life's problems stemmed from people turning their back on God. "But," she says, "when you have gay friends and colleagues who are in loving relationships with their partners, and friends of other faiths or of no faith living happy, contemplative lives, it gets harder to subscribe to a dichotomy of us versus them, of Christians versus non-Christians."

Misener's questions about her faith and her struggles with the church mirror many Millennials'. Nearly 3 in 10 Millennials with a Christian background (29 percent), say they feel forced to choose between their faith and their friends. The same number say they agree that Christians are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths. And almost 4 in 10 (38 percent) say it's been their experience that churches are not accepting of gays and lesbians.

As an editor, I had worked with Misener in the past and was intrigued by her journey—particularly her admission that she missed much about her evangelical experience. I recently caught up with her over email, curious about where she stood now, a few years after the article. "Unfortunately, the apex of my realization that I didn't want to go back to the church were the hateful emails I got after I published my essay on BuzzFeed," she tells me. "Most of the letters I got from Christians were kind, but there were a few really nasty letters. It definitely didn't make me want to go skipping back to the church, clicking my heels."

But, she admits, she remains conflicted about letting that part of her life go. "I do still



deeply miss the church community in a lot of ways,” she says. “A lot of ex-Christians have a chip on their shoulder about the church (some for very legitimate reasons!). I’ll never be one of them. I have seen religion do a lot of bad, but I’ve also seen it do a lot of good. I think the real value in faith of any kind is that it provides a constant reminder that there is something bigger than yourself—that the world doesn’t exist to just orbit your own ego. I’ll always value any religious or non-religious tradition that keeps my innate selfishness as a human being in check.”

Today, Misener tells me she considers herself “non-religious,” which she says mostly just means she doesn’t attend any sort of service or practice a personal prayer life. “I’m open to the idea that that could change in the future, though,” she says.

### THE WAY BACK

From that little small group I was a part of so many years ago, three of the seven of us have returned to church: one couple and me. When I talk to people about declining church attendance among young adults, I often hear something along the lines of, “Oh, once they get married and have kids, they’ll be back.” There’s probably some truth to that—it’s a cycle that’s been seen in generations before this one. However, it’s also possible they won’t; it wasn’t the case for even most of my group. The delay in marriage and children alone means those years between high school youth group and eventual “settling in” to an adult church are extended; it’s no longer three or four years, but a decade or longer. Those are formative years to be away from a church.

And, while we may have wanted to tell ourselves we could grow spiritually and pursue Jesus just fine on our own—no church necessary—the evidence shows otherwise. The truth is, people who are disconnected from church (even those who self-identify as Christian) are proven to be less likely to engage in other faith activities, including Bible reading, prayer, volunteering, and charitable giving. While correlation never equals causation, these are important indicators to pay attention to. Whether we want to admit it or not, church attendance roots believers in regular faith rhythms and practices.

If I could give my decade-younger self some advice, I’d tell her to keep investing in that hungry small group of spiritual seekers. But I’d remind her to not give up on the church in the meantime—broken, flawed, and deeply human though she is. I would gently insist that there is no loving Jesus but not his bride. There is no such thing as a healthy spirituality divorced from religion. To seek God in this world today, I’d say to her, is to necessarily find the church—it is his promised hands and feet; it is the **body of Christ** alive, present, and at work.

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Group defines Millennials as those born between 1984 and 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Future Workplace, “Multiple Generations @ Work.”