

In *Teaching Teenagers in a Post-Christian World*, Jake Kircher calls us to reset how we communicate the truth of Scripture to teenagers. We need to clear our memories and adapt our approach to their real world. It's not the world many of us grew up in. Jake's style is transparent and humble. He advocates an organic style of ministry that acknowledges and draws on the worldviews and learning styles of students. What he says should be carefully considered by youth leaders—especially those of us whose faith was nurtured in the “God said it...I believe it...that settles it” era. It's a helpful and provocative read.

Doug Clark

Director of Field Ministries

National Network of Youth Ministries

As you read this book, you will hit bottom with Kircher and then begin to see youth ministry from a new perspective. It's a tough perspective. You can't just pour the essence of this book into your cup of ministry, add water, and stir. This is a call to leaders to give up all the superficialities, competitions, and idols of our present ministries and accept a radical relationship with Christ, with the intention of showing young people the difficult cost and high value of discipleship—a radical relationship with Jesus. Only this way can young people escape the limitations and bondage of a post-modern, post-Christian age. It is a self-critical approach to ministry—one in which we need to learn and determine our goals through self-reflection and out of deep relationships with youth, discovering with

them what life is all about and how true, loving relationships grow. This book might be too searing and personal, a little too radical and honest for you—though I hope not; because it's also disarmingly practical.

Dean Borgman

**Charles E. Culpeper Professor of Youth Ministries,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Founder and Director, Center for Youth Studies**

How refreshing to get advice from someone who's right in the thick of the challenge of sharing faith with young people. Jake writes from the perspective of an experienced youth pastor who knows that the old methods of teaching teenagers are increasingly ineffective. The goal remains the same: for teenagers to develop a deep commitment to God that will last a lifetime. But standing up front at a youth meeting and telling teens what to believe isn't working. Instead, Jake gives us inspiration and practical guidance to teach teenagers who are immersed in modern culture and, of course, the digital world. This is a place where having the space to explore and ask questions is a critical element of the journey to truth, and Jake's advice will ring true to anyone wondering how to help young people find faith in a postmodern world.

Chris Curtis

CEO, Youthscape

Teaching Teenagers in a Post-Christian World is a quick but important read for far too many of us youth workers who declare we have a plan for ministering to youth, but deep down we aren't really sure that what we're accomplishing will last. Jake Kircher is not afraid to be honest about his youth ministry past and what he believes today.

Mike King

President, Youthfront

Author of *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation*

Twitter @MDKing

I loved this book and I highly recommend it. Jake Kircher understands today's culture and gives us wonderful insights on communicating with teenagers. This book is well researched and no doubt will give you many effective tools to speak to this generation.

Jim Burns, Ph.D.

President, HomeWord

Author of *Teenology* and *Confident Parenting*

Teaching Teenagers in a Post-Christian World is a must-read for youth workers who are in the trenches. Jake Kircher has written an honest and practical book full of thoughtful and deliberate strategies for guiding teenagers' spiritual formation in today's very complex, post-Christian world. Kircher can do

this so well because he is immersed in this paradigm shift as he ministers to teens in the Northeast. His personal accounts resonate with my own and, most likely, with those of any youth worker who is passionate about leading students into life-giving faith. My recommendation is that you buy a copy of this book for yourself—and then buy six more!

Brock Morgan

Author of *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*

Teaching is often missized in youth ministries. We either give it grandiose value, or we're entirely too dismissive of the power of the spoken Word. Jake Kircher is clearly a gifted practitioner, and he does a skillful job of right-sizing the importance of teaching in our ministries. This work is a masterful combination of stating the inaccuracies of our theology and practices, while offering creative, practical insights for how to do it better.

April L. Diaz

Author of *Redefining the Role of the Youth Worker*

The Youth Cartel's Director of Coaching

aprildiaz.com

Teaching Teenagers in a Post-Christian World is an engaging and compelling journey of ministry transformation with huge kingdom implications. I enjoyed Jake's personal, even vulnerable, approach as he moved his youth ministry to one characterized by "exploration and ownership." My favorite

chapter is chapter 5, “Why We Discourage Exploration.” We don’t mean to, of course; but we end up, as he aptly describes it, making our students listeners, not livers of the Christian faith. I love how Jake’s book is filled with fresh hope for youth ministry—and the whole church!

Len Kageler, Ph.D.

Professor of Youth and Family Studies, Nyack College

Author of *Youth Ministry in a Multifaith Society*



TEACHING TEENAGERS IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

CULTIVATING EXPLORATION AND OWNERSHIP

JAKE KIRCHER

TEACHING TEENAGERS IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

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To My Dad

Yours are still the only sermons I can remember from when I was a kid. Thanks for modeling the importance of always pointing people to Jesus. More so, thanks for showing me the necessity of diving into Scripture daily and exploring my faith. I will always have a picture in my mind of you sitting on the floor of your bedroom, underneath the air conditioner, reading your Bible.

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FOREWORD

*When it concerns our spiritual lives,
the answers often get in the way.
Because once we have answers and words,
it's a closed subject.*

— Mark Yaconelli

For the last two summers, we've done something a little bit odd with our graduating seniors.

For well over a decade, we had a tradition of taking our graduates on a trip by themselves. It's become an amazing rite of passage, one that moves our teens from being recipients of ministry to being partners in the gospel. But here's what's been odd over these past two years...

We've moved away from having our staff give a talk each night. For our teens, this was a huge step. We've got a team of amazing communicators, and our group loves to learn from them. But we decided we wouldn't teach on this trip—at least not in the traditional way.

We still had a time of worship, but the focus of our evening programs was...well, to provoke doubt. Rather than bolstering our kids with more of "our answers," we decided we'd demonstrate our confidence in the durability of the gospel by inviting them to express their dormant doubts, which hide so easily in the fog of a mission-camp high.

So we had them read a little Dostoyevsky, a little Bonhoeffer, a little Anne Lamott—each one triggered bigger questions than most of these teenagers had ever considered. And we adults voiced our own doubts as well, hoping to inoculate the young people against the paralysis that so easily overcomes those who are facing questions they can't answer for the first time.

I know what you're wondering: *Did it work? Did anyone doubt your sanity? Did you get fired?*

The quick answer is that the young people who went on these trips will consistently look back on that week as one of the most profoundly faith-shaping weeks of their lives. It was enough to make us ask why.

THE OPPOSITE OF FAITH?

Among other things, the book you now hold in your hands makes a strong case that as we teach our teenagers, we must remember that doubt is not the enemy of faith—although certainty might be. Jake may startle you as he advocates moving students beyond the “certainty” of answers by adopting a way of teaching that invites the unsettledness that awakens real faith.

It's true that certainty has a way of keeping our faith stable, if somewhat domesticated. But doubt can quickly become the ants in the pants of our spiritual lives. We don't have to read too far into Jesus' story to see his peculiar way of decentering his listeners, of tossing them into water that is way over their heads.

It is no small thing that Oswald Chambers, author of *My Utmost for His Highest*—perhaps the most influential book of devotions ever written, said, “Doubt is not always a sign that a man is thinking wrong; it may be a sign that he is thinking.”ⁱ And Scott Peck echoes this idea: “Individuals remain stuck... precisely because they do not doubt deeply enough.”ⁱⁱ

We’d do well to remember that the Pharisees had answers while the disciples—whom God used to change the world—were full of questions.

C. S. Lewis has provided countless Christians with “answers” to some of the most difficult questions of the Christian faith. But at the same time, he wrote:

It is a profound mistake to imagine that Christianity ever intended to dissipate the bewilderment...*It comes to intensify [it]*....Many a man, brought up in the glib profession of some shallow form of Christianity, who comes through reading Astronomy to realise for the first time how majestically indifferent most reality is to man, and who perhaps abandons his religion on that account, may at that moment be having his first genuinely religious experience.ⁱⁱⁱ (emphasis mine)

When it comes to this tension between certainty and doubt, I return again and again to a beautiful story I’ve heard told about a time when someone asked Mother Teresa for prayer:

When the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to

work for three months at “the house of the dying” in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, “And what can I do for you?” Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

“What do you want me to pray for?” she asked. He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States. “Pray that I have clarity.”

She said firmly, “No, I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh commented that *she* always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, “I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”^{iv}

Could it be that our traditional teaching methods are actually impeding teens’ progress in Christ? Could it be that our strong commitment to “core content” may be keeping young people from engaging the claims of Christ with all of their minds? Could it be that our best efforts may be insulating teenagers from asking the very questions that hold the greatest promise of driving them “further up and further in”?^v (Thank you, Reepicheep!)

THE PURPOSE OF TEACHING

I remember reading the transcript of a teenager being interviewed for one of the many research projects on faith

retention in America. The conversation went like this:

Interviewer: Is there any difference between the way you live your life and the way your non-Christian friends live their lives?

Student: No, everyone is the same.

Interviewer: So why are you a Christian?

Student: It's how I was raised.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Student: No.

Interviewer: But being a Christian is important to you?

Student: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Why?

Student: My youth pastor is awesome.^{vi}

I have to admit that, if I'm not careful, the goal of my teaching can easily be reduced to nothing greater than having teenagers (or their parents or the pastor or the board) think I am a good, engaging, and orthodox communicator. In short, I'd love for the students in my youth group to think, *My youth pastor is awesome!*

We've got more (and better) resources at our fingertips than ever before. We've got better PowerPoint presentations and videos. We've got more mnemonic devices (think "The three Cs of transformation") and acrostics (did you know that each letter of the word "RELATIONSHIPS" stands for something?)—and all of them are designed to help us share *our content* more effectively.

But is it possible that although we may be growing more impressive as communicators, our youth are retaining little more than our impressiveness? Is it possible that declaring the gospel might take place the best when we're *listening*, not talking?

I've been wondering lately what might happen if we asked our confirmation students to write their "Statements of Doubt" *before* they write their statements of faith. I wonder if we aren't creating an environment (albeit unintentionally) in which young people develop a faith in their own faith, rather than a faith in God, because they learn from us to limit their faith in Christ to knowing the answers. The result of this approach seems to be spiritually fragile high school graduates who are easily overwhelmed whenever they find themselves in the crucible of doubt.

BRINGING IT HOME

I heard an interesting complaint about one of our mission camps recently. The teens had grown accustomed to one of our staff people "bringing it home" with a powerful message on the last night of camp. But for our recent graduates, we'd decided to forgo the emotional ending of the week and instead invited them to encounter God on their own—"without training wheels."

Some said they missed the emotions of the last night of camp. They missed the chance to recommit their lives to Christ "in the heat of the moment." They missed hearing a strong challenge from a great communicator.

And, frankly, we did too.

But we decided nothing could “bring it home” more profoundly for these young adults than “putting the fork in their hands.”

Teaching Teenagers in a Post-Christian World has raised all kinds of questions in me:

- What would happen if we devoted the same amount of time that we now spend creating great outlines and illustrations and instead invented ways to provoke our kids to think?
- What would happen if our youth group meetings became the most fascinating place in town for unbelieving teens to raise their real-life questions?
- What if there were a way to teach that would equip our young people to bring their friends to Christ themselves, not just invite friends to church or youth group so they can listen to “an expert” who has all the answers?
- What would happen if our youth began tweeting each other’s brilliant insights and questions, rather than the words of the “sage on the stage”?
- What if we put the fork in our students’ hands and trusted that the Spirit is at work in their questions and that God and God’s people are not freaked out by honest questions like “How long?” and “Why?” and “Who says...?”

Our friends at Sticky Faith estimate “that seven of every ten students is struggling with doubts—but only one or two of those ten is likely to have had conversations about those doubts with youth leaders or friends during high school.”^{vii} If Jake’s book does its work, you may wind up with more questions than answers. I think he might have planned it that way.

May those questions drive you deeper into the heart of the One who was fearless in the face of questions, who is big enough to delight in our doubts, and who dreams greater dreams for our teenagers than we can ever imagine.

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ⁱ Jim Thomas, *Coffeehouse Theology: Where Real Questions Meet Honest Answers* (Eugene: OR, Harvest House, 2000), 111.

ⁱⁱ M. Scott Peck, M.D., *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 201).

ⁱⁱⁱ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 81.

^{iv} Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin Path to God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 5.

^v C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), chapter 16.

^{vi} Kenda Creasy Dean, *OMG: A Youth Ministry Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 10.

^{vii} Brad M. Griffin and Kara Powell, “I Doubt It: Allowing Space for Questions,” Fuller Youth Institute, Sticky Faith, <http://stickyfaith.org/articles/i-doubt-it>.

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Thanks to my church, Grace Community Church in New Canaan, for giving me the space to explore new styles of teaching with our students, which brings me to a HUGE thanks to my students for showing up week after week and challenging me to communicate more and more effectively about Jesus and faith. Thanks for pushing me, asking great

questions, and allowing me to do the same to you. Thanks for being brave enough to tell me when you thought I was stupid to believe what I believe.

Thanks to my local youth worker network. I love praying, worshiping, and talking faith with all of you. Thanks for the space to vent, to question, and to explore faith deeper in a setting where I don't have to worry about being fired for what I say or ask. Thanks for your partnership in changing our area for Christ and reaching more and more students and their families with the gospel.

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SOMETHING NEEDED TO CHANGE CHAPTER 1

In my first 12 years of youth ministry, the programs and meetings I ran would always have that special moment when I'd stand up and tell my students everything I knew about Jesus. I'd use video clips, skits, object lessons, songs, and anything else I could think of to complement what I was speaking on that week. But more than anything else, I'd just get up and TEACH.

Honestly, I think I'm pretty good at that sort of thing. I, like some of you, consider the gift of teaching to be one of my biggest strengths and spiritual gifts. And on top of that, I've worked hard to hone my teaching skills by taking all the right classes in college, reading a number of books on the topic, and even attending numerous conference workshops on speaking. Throughout the years, parents and students usually complimented me after my talks ("That was great!"), and from week to week teens kept coming back for more. But during that same time frame, a growing wave of frustration made me doubt my effectiveness as a Bible teacher.

As I spent time with students outside of youth group over coffee or pizza (or any other staple food group of youth ministry), they would always ask me questions, and these questions, much of the time, had already been answered in that "great talk" I'd just given. (Which made me feel like they weren't really listening, even though I knew they were.) I began to feel like all my great teaching and perfectly executed theological explanations were going in one ear and out the other.

Beyond the deeper questions that were being asked by regulars, I also started to realize a number of the students coming to our youth group didn't even have a basic understanding of Christian beliefs. I remember a seventh grader named Nick who attended an outreach event where the gospel was clearly communicated. At the end of the message, he decided to respond to the speaker's invitation to "come forward and receive Christ." Once those who'd come forward were assembled in a back room, the speaker even re-explained the gospel and led them in the "Sinner's Prayer." As I walked out of the room with Nick, I was on cloud nine. I was only 19, and it was my first gig as a youth pastor. (Nick was one of the first students to start a relationship with Jesus on my watch!)

But my spiritual high crashed pretty quickly when we got outside and Nick asked, "Jake, what's sin?" It suddenly dawned on me that the speaker, even though he went through the gospel twice, never actually explained what sin was. He'd just assumed it was common knowledge. When I turned to Nick and wondered aloud if he'd understood anything the speaker had explained, he just beamed at me and answered, "Nope."

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Then there was Dan, a ninth grader who had grown up in Austria with very little church background and had been coming to our youth group for a number of months. One Monday night at our youth group meeting, I was moving along in the talk and made a casual reference to the disciples. Pretty quickly, Dan's hand shot up and he asked, "Wait...what are disciples?" (He didn't even know they were people!)

More recently, during one of our services I was teaching on the David and Goliath story. Afterward, a student came up to me and said, “Dude! I’ve always wanted to know where the idea of a David facing Goliath came from. I always hear it on ESPN in reference to a huge upset by an underdog, but I never knew why. Now I do. Thanks!”

And my favorite? I once asked a group of students to name a person from the Bible who ignored God’s plan and instead did what he wanted to. I was looking for someone to respond that it was Jonah, of course. Instead, a high school girl raised her hand and said, “It’s the Veggie Tales guy who is an asparagus... and there’s a tree that dies.”

It used to be that pretty much every student who walked into a church had some basic knowledge of the Bible and the core beliefs of Christianity. But in an increasingly post-Christian culture, that basic knowledge of Scripture and Christianity is becoming more and more the exception.¹ This is especially true in New England, where I’ve lived and worked my whole life, as well as in much of the Western United States. Many youth workers today are trying to reach students who are third-generation unchurched. If you’re from the Bible Belt, you may be seeing this only minimally right now. But I can guarantee that wherever you’re ministering, this unchurched phenomenon will eventually begin to surface.

When you look at the history of Israel in the Old Testament or at the pattern of spiritual revival and decline since the New Testament church, you can pick up on a common trend:

Generally after a few generations of deep faith, people forget what God has done and drift away from him. While the United States has experienced several significant periods of Christian revival, starting with the First Great Awakening in New England during the 1700s, we're arguably in decline right now in many parts of the country. Between this spiritual decline and our dwindling Recession-era church budgets, many of us have had to re-examine how we do church, but it's particularly our new post-Christian context that has become a reality for many youth workers, including me.

So in the midst of processing my students' increasing lack of what we in the church call Christian education, I quickly ran into another issue that eventually affects every veteran youth worker: My students were graduating, heading off to college, and seemingly losing interest in their faith. I'd check in with former students or see them during school breaks, and our interactions became incredibly predictable. When I'd ask where they were at with Jesus, it was like listening to a recording. They weren't going to any church because they couldn't find one, didn't like what they had found, or were so busy with school and their social lives that they just wanted to sleep in on Sundays. (Yes, I did tell them some churches have evening services on Saturday or Sunday night, but it didn't make a difference.) Some had read bits and pieces of the devotional we gave them as a gift when they graduated, but most hadn't cracked their Bibles at all. To top it all off, many weren't interested in coming to church again—even once they were back home.

Around that same time, a number of books that dealt with this topic started to come out. *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton was one of the first, and the authors concluded through their research that many Christian teens didn't even have a faith in Jesus per se. Instead, the young people in the study believed in what the authors called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. (As in, being a good person, doing what makes you happy, and believing God created everything but isn't really involved anymore.)

Shortly after that, two other books hit the market that looked at the other side of the issue: how young adults felt about their faith and the church as a whole. In response to *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* by Dan Kimball and *unChristian* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, there seemed to be a hyperfocus on how youth ministries, and those who ran them, had failed to teach our teens and what we needed to start doing differently. It wasn't until more recently with Kenda Creasy Dean's *Almost Christian*, along with *Sticky Faith* by Kara Powell and Chap Clark, that this issue became elevated to more of an overall church problem, instead of just a youth ministry problem.

Prior to *Almost Christian* and *Sticky Faith*, it was frustrating to me that so many people knew about the problem, yet so few seemed to have any solutions. And the few small solutions being offered were shot down by my senior pastor and church leadership at the time, compounding my frustration even more. I remember getting to a point where I walked out of a general session at a youth ministry conference, because I was so completely tired of hearing speakers say the same things over

and over again. I was also tired of feeling like a failure, even though I was trying the best I could to help teenagers realize a deeper faith.

With each year in ministry, my frustrations continued to grow as the interactions with my students, both current and graduated, seemed to increasingly follow these same patterns. Everything was eventually pushed over the edge for me, however, while on a student mission trip to Chicago. During a debriefing discussion one evening, we were unpacking some of the teens' interactions with a few homeless people, and the conversation turned to the topic of evangelism and sharing our faith. I casually threw out an (almost) rhetorical question, assuming it would be quickly answered in good Sunday school fashion, but I wasn't prepared for their response. "What's the gospel?" I asked, and—to my shock—my question was met with blank stares.

Now, these teenagers were *not* unchurched students on a mission trip for the first time. These teens were regulars in our programs, and some were even on our student leadership team and had solid Christian parents who were heavily involved in our church as leaders themselves. They were at church and youth group weekly and had heard numerous talks discussing sin, the incarnation, Christ's death and resurrection, and the redemptive work of grace. Yet not one of them was able to clearly outline the gospel without prompts and coaching from me.

I felt like the biggest ministry failure that night. My dad, who is also a pastor, had always taught me that communicating

the gospel was the most important part of teaching, and it's something I'd taken to heart in my ministry. So at that moment I felt like my years in ministry had just been a complete waste of everyone's time.

With my frustrations at a head, I came back from Chicago believing I was done with ministry. Right before the trip, I'd been approached by a teen mentoring organization without any religious affiliation, and they wanted me to consider applying for their director position. When we got back, I went ahead and submitted my résumé for the job.

I obviously wasn't being effective in what I was doing at the church, and I knew something needed to change.

