

Parenting Adult Children Who Rebel Against Biblical Christianity

By Dave DeWitt

In this paper,

- I am defining “adult children” as those living outside of the parents’ home.
- I am defining “children who rebel” as either (1) those who have left a biblical Christian faith (as, for example, following atheism, Islam, Mormonism, or the Emergent Church) or (2) those who claim to be Christians but are living in unrepentant sin (as, for example, unrepentantly practicing cohabitation, homosexuality, lying, or blasphemy).

Statistics About Adult Children Who Leave the Faith

To my knowledge, there is no research directly dealing with the question, “Why do adult children leave the faith of their **parents**?” But there is a lot of research dealing with the question, “Why do young people leave the **church**?” Maybe we are more interested in the church, or we think they are the same. They are, of course, not the same, but there is significant overlap. There are two questions the research considers: (1) How many are leaving? and (2) Why?

(1) How many (what percent of) professing Christian young people are leaving the church?

The answer is: over 70% of church-going Christian young adults will leave the church about the time they leave their parents’ home. There is a saying, “They leave church between the two licenses—the driver’s license and the marriage license.” But current statistics show that today, most of them are not coming back. And this is not just a change in social activity, because almost the same number no longer hold basic Christian beliefs. And those who do return are coming back to a very different (a more religiously inclusive, sin tolerating, Scripture marginalizing) church than the one they left. So, although some will return, we can realistically conclude that over half of the children of Christian parents will become what I have called “adult children who rebel.” And I am guessing that has never been true before in all of history, since the time of Noah’s Flood.

(2) Why are young people leaving?

The answer is basically twofold:

A. Some of the departing adult children were never believers in the first place.

Frank Turek makes a great point about this.

“While there are notable exceptions, most American churches over-emphasize emotion and ignore the biblical commands to develop the mind (1 Peter 3:15; 2 Corinthians 10:5). In other words, we’re doing a great job performing for our youth with skits, bands and videos, but a terrible job informing them with logic, truth, and a Christian worldview. We’ve failed to recognize that what we win them with, we win them to. If we win them *with* emotion, we win them *to* emotion” [crossexamined.org.].

If we win kids **with** emotional religion, instead of a credible biblical Christianity, then we have also won them **to** emotional religion, instead of the God of the Bible. Also, when we push for unbelieving seekers to regularly attend our churches, then our churches must be something they will come to regularly. The actual gospel message (where a just God judges sin and Jesus is the only way) must be compromised because it is hated by the world. So, many never become believers, and they leave when they get older because the emotionalism they came for is no longer a sufficient belief.

B. Churches are not presenting Christianity as a rationally verifiable belief.

The dominating issue that stands out in all of the (up to 2012) data is that young adults are leaving because churches don't deal with Christianity intellectually. Young adults who are leaving the church said things like, "It didn't make any sense anymore," "Some stuff is too far-fetched for me to believe," "I think scientifically and there is no real proof," "Too many questions that can't be answered" [<http://coldcasechristianity.com/2012/are-young-people-really-leaving-christianity>].

In the winter 2012 issue of "Christianity Today," Barna President, David Kinnaman, reported that young people said they are leaving the church for six reasons:

- **Isolationism.** The church "demonizes everything outside church, including the music, movies, culture, and technology."
- **Shallowness.** "Faith is irrelevant and Bible teaching is unclear."
- **Anti-science.** "The church is out of step on scientific developments."
- **Sex.** The "'just say no' philosophy is insufficient in a techno-porno world. Young Christian singles are as sexually active as their non-churched friends."
- **Exclusivity.** "The church is too exclusive in this pluralistic and multi-cultural age."
- **Doubters.** "The church is not a safe place to express doubts."

[<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2012/winter/youngleavechurch.html>]

A Comment

One thing interesting here is that, although I would agree that most churches are **shallow**, **anti-science**, and don't discuss people's **doubts**, I would not have guessed the other complaints. It seems to me, churches are bending over backwards to be tolerant of things like **technology**, **sex/morals**, and other **religions**. Apparently, the church cannot satisfy the global trends of the world, even though it's trying. It seems like there is no way to be tolerant enough.

But, we need to come back to the relevant question for us: "Are young adults leaving their parents religion for the same reasons they are leaving the church?" Probably. But let's take a look at the Bible.

Parenting Adult Children, In the Bible

Most of the children of the early patriarchs had the faith of their parents. We don't know how many children Adam and Eve had, but they had three sons that we know something about. Of the three, Cain was bad, and Abel and Seth were good. We are told Seth had a son named *Enosh*, and *then men began to call upon the name of the Lord* (Genesis 4:26). The Bible follows the line of Seth to Enoch, who *walked with God*, and on to Noah, one of the most godly men in the Bible (Ezekiel 14:14). Noah's extended family seems to have followed his faith, at least his sons and daughters-in-law all got on the ark. Although Noah's sons were not sinless, they did not seem to rebel against God (although their descendants did at the Tower of Babel—and Noah was still alive at that time).

Abraham was involved with his adult children. He found a good wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24:1-8). He also gave gifts to all his later sons, but gave the inheritance to Isaac. Genesis 25:5-6 says,

Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.

Isaac did not rebel against a belief in Yahweh. And, although Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau had some character issues, they did not seem to depart from the faith of Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob became Israel and the father of the 12 tribes.

Children with parents who loved each other seemed to do better. Jacob loved his wife Rachael who had Joseph, and she died having Benjamin. Joseph became the patriarch and spiritual leader of the whole clan. The other 10 were children of the unloved wife Leah and the two concubines. These 10 tried to kill Joseph, ended up selling him into slavery, then lied about him to their father. Although they did repent of it in the end and did not depart from Jacob's faith, there is definitely a difference between the children of the wife Jacob loved and the ones he didn't.

About this time, Job was living in the land of Uz (apparently Edom—Lamentation 4:21). Job had 10, more-or-less adult children, who had parties (maybe birthday parties) where they all invited each other. Job 1:5 reads,

When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

Apparently, his children were not committing any overt sins that Job was aware of because his concern was that they might have *cursed God in their hearts*. But we can note that Job was knowledgeable about their activities, concerned about their relationship with God, and he interceded with God on their behalf. And he did it *continually*.

We know nothing about the children of Moses, but the sons of his brother Aaron were a mixture of good and bad. We know nothing of the children of Joshua or most of the Judges. Gideon had one really bad son who killed all but one of his brothers. And Gideon had 70 sons, with who knows how many wives.

Elkanah loved his wife Hannah, and their son Samuel was one of the most godly men in the Bible. We know nothing about Samuel's wife but the people said, *your sons do not walk in your ways* (1 Samuel 5:8). The same was true of Eli the high priest. Eli did try to correct his sons verbally, but he did nothing to stop their sin.

There is very little correlation between the faith of the kings and their children. We don't know much about Saul's children, but his son Jonathan was better than Saul. David seemed to follow the faith of his father Jesse, but David's children were a mixed bag. Amnon and Absalom were a mess, and we know nothing about their mothers.

But David had two wives he seemed to have loved, at least he treated them well. One was Abigail. They had a son named Chileab who nothing bad is said about. The other was Bathsheba, who David always seemed to treat well. Their son Solomon started well and ended poorly. But Solomon said that he was taught by both his mother and his father, and he wrote the Book of Proverbs as a means of instructing his adult son. Solomon did well until he began marrying foreign wives, then he ended up worshiping their gods. [I'm not sure it's relevant, but Solomon is the forefather of Joseph, and David and Bathsheba's other son Nathan was the forefather of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.]

As for the rest of the kings, there seems to be no correlation of godliness between parents and children. Although it is interesting that the morality of the kings is usually compared or contrasted with a father or forefather. When there is a good king, it says something like,

*He did right in the sight of the Lord, and **walked in the ways of his father David** and did not turn aside to the right or to the left (2 Chronicles 34:2).*

The same comparison is made for bad kings. Elijah wrote a letter to King Jehoram and said,
*Thus says the Lord God of your father David, ...you **have not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat your father** (2 Chronicles 21:13).*

When children of good parents did not follow the faith of their parents, the children were criticized for not doing so. But, it should be noted that children also followed the faith of their bad parents who treated each other well. Ahab and Jezebel treated each other well and were Baal worshippers. Their children followed their faith. And remember their daughter Athaliah became queen in Judah and tried to kill all the descendants of David who were heirs to the throne of the Southern Kingdom.

There are passages about parents teaching and disciplining their children (Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:7; 11:19; 21:18ff; and most of Proverbs 22:6) but very little about responding to disobedient adult children, who are no longer living at home. Although, God did tell Ezekiel that parents are not punished for the sins of their children. Ezekiel 18:20 reads,

*The person who sins will die. **The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity;** the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.*

We know almost nothing about the children of the prophets and, although the apostles had wives (1 Corinthians 9:5), we know absolutely nothing about their children. There are a few New Testament examples. Philip had *four virgin daughters who were prophetesses* (Acts 21:9). Paul talks about a father approving the marriage of a *virgin daughter* (1 Corinthians 7:36-38). But Christianity, unlike other religions, including Judaism, was not to expand by the reproduction of physical offspring. The two main characters of the New Testament, Jesus and the Apostle Paul, were unmarried and had no children. Jesus did not seem to emphasize family faith. Luke tells us,

And it was reported to Him, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You." But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:20-21).

Also, Jesus said, concerning faith in Himself,

They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Luke 12:51-53).

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is the story of a disobedient young adult child who returns when he repents. His father is waiting, but he does not go out and beg him to come home.

The New Testament also seems to prioritize the love of parents for each other, over their love for their children. Paul wrote,

- *Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them (Colossians 3:19).*
- *Older women [are to] encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored (Titus 2:4-5).*

Leaders were to be people who managed their children.

- *He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity, but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God? (1 Timothy 3:4-5).*

- *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).*

Notice, there is no claim that the children of good parents will not become angry. But when parents are nit picking, unrealistically strict, demanding, or perfectionists, that can *provoke children to anger*. The Bible does not say parents are responsible for the character of their children, or how they “turn out.” It only says the children are to be **managed** well, and the parents are not to *provoke* them to anger. Many parents tend to do the opposite. They feel guilty about their children’s character and how they turn out, but don’t manage them well.

Things We Can Learn from the Biblical Examples

1. It was clearly taught that parents should bring up their children in biblical faith.
2. It was normal for biological children to follow their parents’ faith (1 Corinthians 7:14). When they didn’t, something abnormal was going on. The problem might have been with the parents or with the children, or the world’s influences on either one, but something was not as it should be.
3. There was some correlation between the faith of adult children and how their parents treated each other. Parents who treated each other well were more apt to have children who followed their faith.
4. Good parents (like Abraham and Job) helped their children get started in their adult life, financially and socially. They were involved in the lives of their adult children, not by trying to govern their activities but by helping them establish a home and interceding for them before God.
5. Parents were responsible for instruction, discipline, management, and teaching their children the Word of God and the fear of God, while not provoking them to anger. The purpose of this was to prepare the children to become mature adult believers.
6. Although parents were held accountable for managing how a child acted while living under their roof, parents were not accountable for the faith and behavior of adult children who were no longer living with their parents. Parents were not responsible for the character of their children or how they “turned out.” Parents were responsible for what they taught their children, not what the children did with what they were taught.
7. In Christianity, Jesus was a priority over family, and the love of one’s spouse was to be a priority over the love of their children.

My Personal, Subjective, Unscientific Data, Observed for 40 Years

1. My experience for the last 40 years of working with parents of adult children is that those parents, who have faithful children, are kind to one another. No scenario is always true, but the general trend is that parents who treat each other well are more likely to have faithful children. Parents who do not treat each other well (or where one does not treat the other one well), parents who do not get along, who argue repeatedly and disagree, or get divorced, will more often have unfaithful children. It would seem that one of the best things a parent can do for his or her children is to love their biological mother or father, more than they love their children.
2. I have seen that when a father/husband sees the solution as everyone submitting to him, in other words, the problem being they do not submit to him, then the battle is already lost. That is only a testimony to the fact that he has not been the head of his family. Commands about submission are never given to the father so that he can pass them on as a basis for keeping his children faithful.
3. Children leave the faith for a variety of reasons. There may be nothing the parents did, or could have done, to keep them faithful. In which case, there is nothing they can do now to persuade

them to return. Also, I have observed that when parents become believers as adults, the children who grew up before the parents were saved are more likely to be unbelievers or disobedient.

Nonetheless, parents should ask if they have done things or presented Christianity (or themselves as believers) in such a way that has caused their children to leave the faith. Because, if they did some things that drove the children away from the faith and they keep doing those things, they will keep convincing their children to stay away from the faith. If you keep doing what you are doing, you will get more of what you've got.

4. Biblical parents always welcome repentant children with open arms (Luke 15:11-32). Of course, almost all parents do this. But biblical parents will also distinguish between forgiveness and on-going temptation. Repentant children should always be forgiven and restored to fellowship, no matter how many times they have sinned. That does not mean they should be given the same temptations to sin again (an alcoholic should not be given a drink, a financially irresponsible person should not be given a loan, etc.). Sin reveals weakness that needs to be treated, not enabled.
5. It has been my observation that mature Christian parents focus on the spiritually healthy children, the ones who have not left the faith or Christian morality. Many less mature parents make the mistake of putting their focus, and their efforts, on the wayward children while neglecting the faithful children.

With the quarantined lepers in Israel (Leviticus 13) and the excluded unrepentant brother in 1 Corinthians 5, the focus was on the healthy, not the sick. The emphasis should be on the believing children, not the adult unbelieving children. *Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump* (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). The sick, and the spiritually sick, should be quarantined, not prioritized. Of course, you don't withhold compassion from the sick, but neither do you allow them to infect the healthy. And, by the way, this is especially difficult in a mother-led family. Mothers are nurturers.

6. Good parents keep the discussion open. They never "agree to disagree" because that ends the discussion, and trivializes the relationship. They take the time to be informed about whatever issues the rebellious adult child is dealing with (like maybe it's evolution, abortion, lying, or the liberal moral agenda) and engage in discussions about those issues. Good parents ask questions. If a child is an atheist or has a new religion, parents are more apt to reveal its errors by asking about it, than they are by condemning it. The basic rule is: Never attack, never accuse, always ask questions.

You will notice that the objective in most of Jesus' conversations was not just to make a point but to allow His opponent to come to the bankruptcy of his own position. People will not tend to leave what they believe just because you have good reasons for what you believe. They will just say, "that's okay for you but not for me." People will only consider your faith after they reject their own. Most people believe, "If it's not broke, don't fix it." [And, by the way, don't turn it into a political argument, keep it about the Bible.]

7. Mature parents do not see problems as something that can be solved. Immature parents look for solutions and (hopefully quick and painless ones) to their child's unfaithfulness. My observation is that mature parents look at their situation as a lifestyle they must develop, not a problem to be solved. So rather than go to counselors or secular programs, they establish a biblical home and

live with the situation in a godly manner. The reality is, most problems cannot be solved. But they can be treated.

8. Mature parents will involve their children in ministry. Good parents are involved with people, where the lives of those people are being conformed to the image of Christ. A good question for parents is, “Have your children witnessed the changed life of someone outside the family, because of your ministry?”
9. Mature parents have a good knowledge of the Bible. They read and study their Bible and know its content. Bible knowledge is not sufficient, but it is necessary. Parents cannot communicate a knowledge they don’t know.

But there is one more area of parenting rebellious adult children that requires special attention.

The Distinction Between Taking a Stand and Removing Fellowship

Adult Children Who Have Become Unbelievers

It is my observation that if adult children have become unbelievers, that is, they once considered themselves to be Christians but no longer do, then good parents treat them as any other unbeliever. They share the Gospel with them, they pray for their salvation, they are open to have discussions with them, and participate with them in social events. Paul said,

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world (1 Corinthians 5:9-10).

The rule of thumb is, treat unbelieving adult children as you would any other unbelieving adult. Suppose you have an adult customer, or neighbor, or high school friend, who is an atheist. How should you treat them? Hopefully, you would witness to them and speak to them about their atheism as the occasion allows. You would not refuse to go fishing or play golf with them, but you would not let them teach their atheism to your children. Mature parents might socialize with unbelieving adult children, but they do not allow unbelieving children to bring their sin into their house (sleeping with their girlfriend or boyfriend, bringing a homosexual partner, practicing underage drinking, speaking blasphemy, promoting unbiblical theology, mocking God or the Bible, etc.).

Unrepentant Sinful Adult Children Who Claim To Be Believers

At issue is the distinction between (1) taking a stand that protects the family versus (2) removal of social interaction. I shall call it,

1. **Quarantining the sin** to protect the healthy (as was done with leprosy under the Mosaic Law – Leviticus 13) versus
2. **Removing fellowship** by withdrawing social interaction (*not to associate with... not even to eat with such a one* – 1 Corinthians 5:11)

[I am purposefully not using the term “excommunication” because it means to “officially exclude (someone) from participation in the sacraments and services of the Christian church” (“New Oxford American Dictionary”). That assumes the “Christian church” is an institution and the exclusion is only about “sacraments and services.” The removal of fellowship in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 is social, not institutional.]

If a sinning adult Christian child refuses to repent, and, as a parent, you believe this has gone to the point of requiring removal of fellowship, hopefully you would follow Matthew 18:15-17. Go to them individually, and then take some others along from outside the family, eventually take it to the church, and the church would decide to remove fellowship. An individual family does not have a biblical mandate to remove fellowship. If the parents are part of a church which has removed fellowship from their adult child, then the family members should not associate with that child either.

We'll take an extreme example, just to make the point. Let's say some Christian parents have a son who is a mass murderer, claims to be a Christian, is unrepentant for his sin, and he is in prison.

- Suppose no one other than the family has been involved, and the son is not influencing other family members because everyone understands that he is wrong and should repent. Is it all right for the parents to go and visit the son in prison? **Yes.**
- Suppose the parents ask some of the son's other Christian friends to go talk to him, and after several visits by several friends, the son still refuses to admit he was sinning. So a group of families get together, including the parents, and all decide he must be removed from Christian fellowship. Is it all right for the parents to go and visit their son in prison? **No.**

Taking action against sin, without removing fellowship, is a difficult but important distinction to make. Parents should never tolerate sin in their adult Christian children under the guise of being "loving" or "keeping communication open." Whatever is tolerated is approved and becomes the new normal (and the new low) for the family. But one single family is not a platform for removal of fellowship. Paul presents removal of fellowship in the context of a group gathering, which might assemble for the Lord's Supper Communion (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

Historically, Most Churches Could Remove Fellowship Quite Effectively

The apostles defined the local church as all the believers in a location, usually a city or other geographic region. In that city, believers had gatherings, centered on the Lord's Supper Communion, in various homes. But all the believers, in all those house gatherings, were one church (the church of Corinth, the church of Rome, the church of Jerusalem, etc.). The idea of Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 was that an unrepentant sinning believer was to be (eventually) removed from the fellowship of all his believer friends in the city or village where he lived. It was not that one group would exclude him from their group, thus allowing him to simply join another group.

Through much of history this worked fairly well in small towns, maybe even in large ones. Even though the church had become institutionalized and met in buildings, it is likely that all the believers in the town were part of that fellowship. For example, if you were in a Lutheran Church in Eisleben, Germany in the 1600s, or in a Methodist Church planted by one of the circuit riders in Dodge City, Kansas in the 1800s, all your Christian friends were most likely in that church. It was probably the only church in town. In that case, removal of fellowship (even if it was defined as "excommunication") was pretty devastating because you would have nowhere to go for Christian fellowship, or to worship, or to take Communion. It could have even affected your ability to do business, since much of your business would be closely tied to those Christian friends.

Today, Removal of Fellowship Is Somewhere between Difficult and Impossible

In today's post-modern world, there are institutional churches all over the city that have no connection with one another. Most of our Christian friends are scattered among those churches, and we don't know all (or most) of the people in the institutional church we attend. Our real church, as defined by the apostles, is our network of close Christian friends all over town. But they never all gather together, except possibly when a "para-church" organization has a conference or special speaker.

Today, this is complicated by the fact that most of our institutional churches pursue “seekers.” That means many people in the congregation are unbelievers, whose sin must be tolerated or they would leave. Then there is the problem that many professing Christians attend mega-churches (off and on), but most of their friends are unbelievers. Small groups within the mega-churches don’t help, because one’s closest friends are somewhere else, and removal from one of these groups simply allows the sinner to join another group or another institutional church across town. Removal of Christian fellowship becomes meaningless and ineffective, if not impossible.

The Temptation Is for the Family to See Itself As a Church

Although there are exceptions, most of today’s institutional churches are not likely to remove fellowship. The temptation of the sincere Christian family is to take that role upon themselves. They understand that something must be done about adult children who claim Christianity but live in sin. They see that most so-called Christian families do nothing, under the flag of “love” and “keeping communication open.” Good parents realize it is not “loving” to tolerate sin, since it only enables the sinner. And it is of no value to keep communication open, if you don’t have something worthwhile to communicate. Therefore, some good intentioned families make the mistake of removing fellowship from their rebellious adult children.

But a family is not a church, a network of believers across the city. When families see themselves as a church, strange things can happen. Families (and other institutions) may exclude people for social or political or cultural issues that are not legitimate reasons to remove fellowship. They might remove someone who smokes, supports liberal political views, or has blue hair. On the other hand, they may not take a stand at all because they believe the only stand to take is to remove fellowship (*not to associate with...not even to eat with such a one*—1 Corinthians 5:11). When parents see the devastating effect that would have on the family, they often (or usually) opt for doing nothing at all.

It is my observation that mature Christian parents of adult rebellious children make an outward statement, which takes a physical (not just a verbal) stand against sin. This varies with the family and the situation. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. But good parents do not practice removal of fellowship. For example, they may refuse to attend an unbiblical wedding, but do not shun the married couple after the wedding. That way they have taken a definite strong position for the truth of the Word of God, which is more than just verbally saying, “they know where I stand.” But it also does not assume the family is a church practicing the removal of fellowship. Or a family may decide not to finance the college expenses of a child cohabitating with a girlfriend or boyfriend. But they do not exclude them from family activities.

Prevent Influence—Don’t Remove Fellowship

In some cases, the ongoing situation is also sinful. For example, if an adult child marries an unbeliever, the wedding is wrong but the marriage is not. That is, if you knew a believer married to an unbeliever, you would not say their marriage was unbiblical (1 Corinthians 7:13). But if the marriage was between two homosexuals, then the marriage itself would be sinful (Matthew 19:4-6). Therefore, it would be more than the wedding that could not be tolerated.

In some cases, rebellious adult children are like *leaven*, spreading their sin to all the family. Good parents will not allow that. So the sinful adult child must be quarantined because the principle *a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough* (1 Corinthians 5:6) is true everywhere, including families. And in some cases, it is impossible to have family fellowship with the sinner, without that influence.

But the purpose of the social limitation is to protect the family, not to *deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh* (verse 5). In other words, good parents will focus on the rest of the family, not the sinful adult child. Quarantine is for the protection of the healthy (Leviticus 13).

In the case where adult children are, say, homosexuals or atheists who want to flaunt their sin, good parents will place limitations on attending family activities. But the purpose here is not removal of fellowship, but protection of the family from the leaven-effect of their sin. For example, a homosexual adult child might be invited to a holiday meal but not be allowed to bring their gay or lesbian partner. But if the homosexual, coming alone, was promoting the tolerance of his or her sin to their siblings, or degrading the parents for not tolerating it, then he or she might also be banned from family activities. At another time, the parents would still be open to have lunch with the homosexual son or daughter because they are preventing their influence, not removing fellowship. And, although they don't need to bring it up every time, the parents will make it somehow clear that they have not begun to tolerate the child's sin. Usually, the indication of the fact that the parents have actually limited the influence of the sinning child is that the sinning child will react by putting limits on your involvement in their life.

Of course, all believers should have the primary motivation to please God and be true to His Word. But the removal of fellowship (*not to associate with...not even to eat with such a one*—1 Corinthians 5:11) has two specific goals:

1. To *deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh* if they don't repent *so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus* (1 Corinthians 5:5).
2. Keeping the sin from influencing other believers because *a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough* (verse 6).

Good Christian parents, it seems to me, only have the second of these goals for their families.

Our Global Situation

Problem:

1. The world is getting worse. The proof is that the (1) percent, (2) availability, and (3) tolerance of biblically defined sin have all increased.
2. Churches are not helping. They are not preparing young people for the onslaught of global worldliness. It used to be a "good sermon" was one that made you feel bad (convicted). Today, a "good sermon" is one that makes you feel good (accepted).
3. Social institutions (the media, movies, books, TV, public schools) are all extremely liberal, religiously universal, evolutionary, and nonjudgmental, except they are intolerant of the Bible. [College is a cult.]
4. The friends of your kids will come from divorced parents and unmarried parents, leaving kids without dads, and therefore, without moral enforcement.
5. Government handouts enable irresponsibility and boredom, which is "the devil's workshop."

Treatment (there is no solution):

1. Parents, who treat each other well, will create the best environment for children to return to their faith.
2. Parents who are not legalistic or hypocritical will demonstrate a more realistic faith.
3. Parents who refuse to "leave the Bible out of it" will create a home that will be inviting for those who wish to follow the Bible.
4. Parents who judge the world's values, being intolerant of evil and godless teaching, will provide solutions that the world does not provide.

5. Parents who point to the God of the Bible, not themselves or their church or other social “communities,” will take the focus off of the world’s mentality, creating a haven for those who want it.

A Conclusion, In the Form of Questions and Answers

What can parents do to get disobedient adult children to return to biblical Christianity?

Probably nothing. At any rate, do not insist on solving the problem. Focus on how to live with it in a godly manner.

Why do children become unbelievers?

If they are actually unbelievers, they never were believers. If they were believers, they are still believers. If they are violating biblical commandments, and they claim to be believers, parents should take action to restrict their influence on the family.

What should parents do about children who become atheists?

Treat them like all the other unbelievers you know—associate with them, witness to them, and pray for them. But don’t let them promote their atheism in your home.

What should parents do about unrepentant sinful children who claim to be Christians?

1. Do not allow their sinful activities or philosophies to be brought into or taught in your home.
2. Some outward public action should be taken to make the statement that they are acting contrary to the Bible. What we tolerate, we embrace. Any tolerated sin becomes the new normal (or the new low).
3. Ongoing fellowship should be encouraged. Removal of fellowship is inappropriate, unless a network of believers in several families across the city (or locality) decides it, after following the procedure of Matthew 18:15-17.

What can parents do to create the best climate for rebellious adult children to return?

1. Parents should treat each other well. Show that God is transforming the lives of their parents.
2. Do not be legalistic or hypocritical. God’s rules are not negotiable, but yours should be. Make it all about God, not about you, or them, or mankind. And don’t use the Bible to make political points.
3. Discuss Christianity in a rational, informed manner, applying it to real world situations. Make it all about the Bible, taken at face value (author’s intended meaning), not your ideas.
4. Keep the conversation ongoing. **Never** “agree to disagree.” That closes the door on thinking, and puts your relationship on a surface, shallow, irrelevant basis.
5. Always tell the truth, no matter how hard the question. Lying is an epidemic. Don’t spread the epidemic.