



Going, Going, Gone!



Protecting Teens' Hearts
That Are On The Edge

by Jeff Schadt

dawsonmedia



Parents play a far bigger role in the lives of their teens than society would have us believe. The tragedy is that even as parents love their children and desperately desire to see them walk with Christ, they may fail to realize that some of the very things they do to help them follow Christ may ultimately drive them away from the church and even Christ. *Going, Going, Gone!* is a must read for any parent who wants to see their young adult children succeed socially, academically, and spiritually when they graduate from high school!

—Val Nordbye, Mom and National Director of Campus Ambassadors

The information found in *Going, Going, Gone!* significantly improved my relationship with my teenage son. The change in me was so obvious that my son sent me a thank you letter during his freshman year of college. He thanked me for changing the way I approached him in high school and listed the changes that greatly impacted him. He credited the changes for being the reason he was walking with the Lord in college!”



—Rick Rablin, Father and Senior Systems Analyst, Alaska Airlines

Today it is clear that we are not connecting with many of our young people. *Going, Going, Gone!* is an insightful and challenging look at the reasons so many teens are distant from their parents and church! It will challenge you, alter your perspective, and change the course of your relationship with your teenager!

—Tom Scott, COO Association of Christian Schools Intl.

Anyone who lives or works with teenagers must read this book. Over 70 percent of young people make a departure from their faith after they graduate from high school. But parents and youth pastors can help change that if they act now, *before* their kids go off to college or work life. Jeff Schadt has spent thousands of hours interviewing and counseling students. In this book, he paints a vivid picture of how to approach teens using the discipleship model that Jesus employed. It's all in your Bible, but Jeff expertly directs the reader and overlays the context of today's youth culture. This provides guidance for shepherding our young people before they're gone.

—Brian Raison, Author & Founder of *College101.org* and youth development educator at The Ohio State University



University campuses can be very perplexing for freshmen. With freedoms to do what they want like never before, they need wisdom. How do we prepare them for such an onslaught of temptations and trials? Jeff Schadt's research into this culture will help guide you in guiding them. This is a book that needs to be in the hands of parents, youth pastors, and most importantly, youth themselves.

—**Dr. Darryl DelHousaye**
President of Phoenix Seminary





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FOREWORD

Josh McDowell



I had the opportunity to begin a friendship with Jeff Schadt when he, along with the National Network of Youth Ministries and Mission America Coalition, called a national strategy meeting on “the loss of youth from the church.” At the conclusion of that meeting the group voted to form the Youth Transition Network and asked Jeff to head the effort.

In the summer of 2005, Jeff and I spent a half-day together in Texas discussing “the loss of youth from the church” and the Youth Transition Network. At the conclusion of that day, I am sure Jeff did not anticipate my response. I decided to issue him a challenge: “Jeff, after our time together I am convinced you are anointed for this purpose. The only question I have for you is, are you willing to go to the poor house for it?” Neither I nor Jeff knew how prophetic that statement would be as Jeff has sacrificed beyond many I know to pursue the dilemma confronting the church concerning our young people.

Since our meeting in Texas, Jeff and a small loyal team at YTN have worked to assemble a team of ministries to address the loss of youth and build a national transition website, LiveAbove.com, to connect high school seniors to college ministries before they leave home. They also have met with more than 1,500 students in small groups to begin to understand the





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students' perspectives regarding why so many teenagers exit the church.

The challenge of reaching and keeping our youth has been one of my top priorities for many years. In my book *The Last Christian Generation*, I addressed the need to reexamine the church's approach to young people. Over the last several years the urgency has only increased.

Today we are witnessing a growing trend of younger and younger students dropping out of their youth groups and churches. In fact, today many large youth groups will have just a handful of juniors and very few, if any, seniors.



Many factors impact our youth and their faith. After 50 years of working with young people, I have become convinced that parents are the key to raising up the next generation of godly men and women who will radically pursue the Lord. Our families in the church can either be the one safe haven for young people in a hostile world, or an environment that will discourage their faith. The youth culture, entertainment, and media undermine their Christian convictions every minute of every day. Sunday morning church and Wednesday evening youth group meetings in their present state are by themselves unable to counter the impact of our culture.

Parents and the family structure remain the best hope we have for raising up the next generation of believers. In saying this, we must also acknowledge that the expectations and pressures placed upon parents and their time by our society have never been greater. Yet if we continue on our present course the outcome is clear; we will lose the next generation!

Given the forces at work on our young people today, we must increase the priority of our day in and day out connection with our young people. When we lose our connection to our teenagers, we will lose the battle for their hearts and minds. If we are to avert the powerful influences impacting our young people, it is



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vital that parents' relationships with their children remain strong as youth move into their pre-teen and teen years.

To accomplish this, we need to understand our teens' perspective on life, including school, church, and home. Our teens' need for love, acceptance, guidance, and their growing desire for independence, are often at war with their parents. This may lead parents to believe that having a good relationship with their teen is impossible and thus look to a youth pastor or another adult to guide their teen in these challenging years.

Yet research indicates that 69 percent of teens want more involvement in their lives from their parents. Many parents might say, "Not my teen!" but our studies indicate that their desire for involvement is real. The type of involvement they are seeking and receiving is often different, which creates a wall that causes parents to believe they cannot be a vital part of their teen's life.

Jeff Schadt has spent time with 1,500 teens seeking to understand the forces that are dampening teens' response to faith, parents, and youth leaders. *Going, Going, Gone!* looks deeply into the perspective of teens, helping parents and youth leaders better relate to their life experience. Greater understanding enables us to examine the view we hold of our young people and the approach we take to leading them. Altering the approach has yielded amazing changes in the relationships between parents and teens who have participated in his "Shepherding for the Future" seminars.

In the fast-paced world in which we live, it is easy to lose sight of what matters most. Continuing on the course we are on today points toward an outcome not so dissimilar to that of Europe and its aging and dwindling church. We as parents and leaders must rethink how we will raise up the next generation of church leadership! The future of the church, our nation, and its ability to influence the world is at stake.

While this is a universal issue, the battle is won and lost one student, one parent, one family, and one youth group at a time.





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Every parent and every youth leader want their high school graduates to succeed in their life and faith beyond high school! *Going, Going Gone!* will help you assess your approach to your teenagers and help establish a course that will build a relationship and foundation that will set your students up to succeed, just as Jesus set His disciples up to succeed as He prepared to exit their lives.



C H A P T E R O N E

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Kim's heart is beating quickly. It's her eighteenth birthday and she's heading home from high school with just one thing on her mind. Her parents are also excited to celebrate her birthday and are looking forward to seeing her graduate in just two months. To them everything is going well. Their son is in full-time ministry at their church and their daughter is doing fine. They're proud of her; she's a good student involved in her church youth group; she has not been the typical troublesome teen. They're thankful that she is not like so many in their church who have gone off track in high school.

Arriving home for a family celebration, Kim feels like she is about to explode. The sense of fear that has built up within her over the last couple of years threatens to overwhelm her. As she walks through the door, her parents greet her with smiles and hugs, unaware of the storm that is about to strike them with gale force winds.

Kim knows that her parents have no idea of what has really been going on in her life. She has managed to play the role expected of her for several years, acting as if she were on a stage. While her parents have sensed something has been changing with Kim, they have no idea the depth of the deception that has been taking place. Kim believed she was doing what was best for everyone, because she did not want to hurt them or destroy their reputation. It also made living with her parents trouble free. She was, after all, keeping the peace by not letting them know the things in which she was really involved.



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Knowing that she is about leave what has been her home for the last eighteen years, Kim's mind races as her parents hug her. She scrambles for the words to say what will surely be a shocking revelation to her parents. Her course is set. It is a path that at this point no one, including her parents, will be able to dissuade her from taking. She has hidden her real life from them for nine months. It's time for the deception to come to an end.

As they sit down for their family celebration, Kim blurts out, "I'm moving out of the house tomorrow." Her parents, not believing what they have heard, raise their voices with a familiar, "What?" using a tone that cuts deeply. Their reaction only increases her determination not to listen to anything they have to say and to move out as quickly as possible.

In the ensuing discussion, Kim informs them that she will be moving in with a man who is six years older and that they can't stop her, because, after all, she is eighteen.

Later that night her parents lie stunned, wide awake in bed, pondering over and over, "How did this happen? How could we not know it was this bad? Where did she meet him? How long have they been seeing each other? This is a nightmare; this cannot actually be happening." Almost simultaneously they arrive at the stark realization that this is not a bad dream, and worse yet, they do not truly know their own daughter. Tears roll down their faces as they can only ask each other and God, "What went wrong? Our daughter is GONE!"



Speaking with students like Kim across the country, I'm struck by the discouragement and disillusionment I hear in their stories. From these discussions it is clear that students do not wake up one day and say, "I'm going to mess up my life today." Rather, their choices are part of a gradual process building for several years as their hearts drift ever so silently into the darkness, further and further from the Lord and their parents.

Kim is not alone. Based on research executed in the summer



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of 2007 by LifeWay, 70 percent of eighteen to twenty-two year olds take a break from the church.¹ Every year 3.1 million high school students graduate in the United States.² About 31 percent, or 961,000, of these graduates attend church regularly.³ If 70 percent leave the church, we have 673,000 walking away annually. Many do not move in with an older man, but the fact that they leave the church and enter lifestyles that often surprise and leave questions with their parents is undeniable. Many parents like Kim's do not see it coming. Kim's parents saw a teenager who seemed to have it together at home, at church, and academically. Therefore they believed all was well and that their child would do well when she left home.



Through our interaction with youth pastors across the nation it has become clear that the loss of youth begins before they leave home, during the junior and senior years of high school. Youth groups across the nation see a huge drop off in the attendance of juniors and seniors. As an example a youth group of eighty might have thirty freshmen, thirty sophomores, fifteen juniors, and five seniors. If students are checking out spiritually in high school, they're signaling an underlying problem that will contribute to the loss when they leave home and head into college or a career.

What makes this so alarming? When our teens leave home they are heading into what *USA Today* deemed the most dangerous year in the life of a teen. A headline article, "First Year of College is the Riskiest," chronicled data showing that accident, suicide, and alcohol-related death rates are the highest among recent high school graduates.⁴ Later in this book, the "When They Graduate" chapter will discuss the forces that have a negative impact on students and lead to these statistics.

As parents and leaders we need to understand the real forces and points of stress that impact our high school students and graduates as opposed to counting on their return later in life. The LifeWay study that indicates a 70 percent loss of eighteen to

UNDERSTANDING THEIR ISSUES

It was Saturday and YTN was holding its first session related to the loss of youth with a group of about sixty juniors and seniors at the Arizona State Youth Convention. We had prayed for weeks that the students would be honest, transparent, and help us understand the issues that had so many young people leaving the church.

The session had a twofold purpose; to roll out a preparation session for students and to incorporate a research component. After sharing honestly about the trials of recent years in my life, we began the research component by breaking into small groups. Students were asked to discuss why they believed so many youth were leaving the church. Then each group reported back their compiled reasons while a student recorded them on a white board.

It took about twenty minutes for each of the nine small groups to come up with ten reasons why they believed so many of their peers were leaving the church. Our fear that they would not be open and honest was shattered with the third reason given: sex. To say I was taken aback is an understatement. I had not even remotely expected sex to come up as a reason for leaving the church.

I responded, "Okay, you surprised me with that one and I'm confused. Why would sex make you want to leave the church?"

Both the young man who had shared the reason and the group became silent; the whole room took on a weighty feeling.

I asked, "Is the reason sex makes you want to leave the church

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because you want to have sex and you know you can't as part of the church?" A swift and decisive "No!" came from all corners of the room.

So I responded, "Well then, why?" The boy who had listed the reason finally blurted out from the awkward silence, "Because we have had sex!" As I scanned the room about two-thirds of the heads in the room were nodding in agreement, again setting me back on my heels.

I probed. "Okay, so you've had sex. Why does that make you want to leave?" They answered, "Because we feel so guilty." I pressed on. "Why does guilt make you want to leave the church?"

They answered in rapid-fire responses:

"It makes us not want to come on Sunday."

"It makes us not want to open the Bible."

"It makes us want to run and hide because we're going to hear more of what we need to live up to and we're already failing!"

Then I asked, "Do you have anyone you can share that guilt with?" "No!" "What about your parents?" The whole room exploded with energy. "No way!"

"They would take away my car."

"They would not let me see my boyfriend or girlfriend again."

"They would ground me for life."

"They would kill me!"

"Well, can you share it with your youth workers?" They again said no and when I asked why not, they told me, "Things leak, parents find out and you become labeled as the problem kid in the church."

Altogether this first exercise yielded thirty-six reasons why teens were leaving the church. In one of the early sessions with students, I had dismissed some of their responses as invalid or excuses. Yet as we conducted more sessions and compiled the responses, we began to explore a number of what appeared to be highly charged reasons for students' leaving the church. In tracking the frequency of the responses across the country, nine

THE DEVIL'S TRIANGLE

Many of us are familiar with the lore of the Devil's Triangle, also known as the Bermuda Triangle. It's an imaginary area off the southeast coast of the United States, noted for a high incidence of unexplained disappearances of ships and aircraft. In 1945, Flight 19, consisting of a squadron of five TBM Avenger Torpedo Bombers, while in radio contact with the tower became confused, fell silent, and disappeared. Today, it seems that we are losing entire squadrons of young people who were in contact with us, seemed to be doing well, and then all of a sudden silently disappeared.

Some want to question the faith or salvation of those who leave the church, believing that if they were true believers they would not have grown so distant and cared so little about the truth we have taught them. Clearly there are unbelievers in our youth groups, but to conclude that a majority of the loss is a result of kids who grew up in the church and did not become true believers points us toward only one set of conclusions and solutions.

Through our time with young people, we believe that many that leave are indeed believers who made "child-like" faith decisions in Sunday school, at VBS, or at camp. Their young hearts were open to the Lord and they asked questions about God. But somewhere between ages nine and thirteen, their hearts start to

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vanish into our own version of the Devil's Triangle, much like the airplanes did in the Bermuda Triangle.

While the disappearance of the heart may appear sudden to a parent or youth worker, the opposite is actually true. Just think about the last time you attempted to bury something, especially if that object was not flat but had a number of high spots. It took shovelful after shovelful before finally that last load completely covered the item and it vanished from sight.

Our kids' hearts are not flat. Indeed, they're unlike any inanimate object. Our kids' hearts are actually fighting for life and light. Over time many factors beyond their control toss load after load upon their hearts until at last the fight is over; their hearts are completely obscured. The good news is that the heart infused with the Lord does not die even when buried six feet underground. That heart is there waiting and hoping, and can be unearthed.

As we have analyzed the conversations and videotaped interviews with teens, we have found a spiritual version of the Devil's Triangle at work. We've come to call this the Triangle of Discouragement.

The bedrock for the triangle is identified by George Gallup Jr., the famous researcher who has helped many corporations successfully connect their products and services with our young people. Gallup is quoted as saying:

*Sadly, parents and adults in general tend to view young people in a negative light, overlooking their truly positive characteristics. Much of this negativism stems from a lack of awareness and knowledge about the lives and aspirations of youth.*¹³

In this quote we discover truth even within the body of Christ. Many parents joke and talk about the challenge of their kids heading for the teenage years. These years are seen as hard, risky, and something not joyfully anticipated. Further, teens'

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thoughts, ideas, and desires are often not given much credence within the leadership structure of their local church because they are young, idealistic, and inexperienced. This is sadly ironic when one looks at our nation's history and finds that often major mission movements and awakenings come from our young people.

This general negative perception of young people in our country and our churches is not missed by our youth. It serves as the basis for the three components of the Triangle of Discouragement, which can make the hearts of our youth vanish before our eyes.

Many influences act on the lives of our young people today. Three of these together consume the majority of a young person's productive time: parents, school, and church/church related activities. Each desires to develop young people into mature, responsible adults. Within the realm of each is an additional influence, the community of students and friends who are part of the organization. They emphasize the importance of the culture that exists among the students in these environments. As we've discussed these influences with teens, we've discovered a disconnect between the mission of these three influences and the students' perception and interaction with them.

