

"I Hate Church!"

*What to do when your child doesn't want to go to church anymore.
by Jim Burns*

Dad, I hate our church. I think it is boring and I don't want to go there again."

Even though I had heard similar words from my older daughter a few years before, I was absolutely not ready to hear the negativity and passion of this statement from our second daughter, Rebecca, age 16. My first reaction was to get angry with her. Then I felt myself moving into preaching mode.

But before I said something I knew I'd regret, I took a good look at my daughter. Something was causing this most-of-the-time wonderful kid who sings in the worship band and helps lead a Fellowship of Christian Athletes huddle to react so strongly.

After taking a few deep breaths, I simply said, "It sounds like something might have happened to make you hate something you liked so much just a few weeks ago." She blurted out, "Josh and Justin are spreading rumors about me. Plus, I'm bored with the worship." After separating the statements, I realized Rebecca wasn't so much rejecting the idea of church, but rather looking for new ways to deepen her developing faith.

As teens grow more independent, it's natural for them to want to find expressions of faith that they can call their own. At the same time, I believe it's vitally important for families to worship together.

This is an area where I encourage parents to make their own desires clear. We've told our daughters that church is not an option. We eat, sleep, go to school, work, and attend church. Sure, we've missed a Sunday or two because of gymnastics championships, soccer tournaments, and other events, but our commitment to participate in the life of the church is a non-negotiable.

We expect the girls to participate in one worship service per week and one other faith-based activity that is meaningful to them. For the most part, this keeps arguments about church attendance to a minimum.

Encourage your teen to invite a friend to the worship service or to youth retreats and special events. For teens, relationships supersede just about everything else. When I was a youth pastor I never once had a student ask, "I'm considering going on the retreat, but I was wondering what Scripture passages you will be using?" Instead, they'd ask, "Who else is going?" When one of our daughters was feeling left out in her youth group, we helped pay for a friend to join her on one of the group's outings. They went for the fun but ended up being drawn into the spiritual atmosphere of the group as well.

Find out if your teen's school has Young Life, Campus Life, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, or any other parachurch ministry. Look for service projects she can do with friends. We've told our children that they can join us for a one-on-one Bible study in lieu of another activity. Our girls have never taken us up on it (smile), but we know a family where a wayward daughter came back to the Lord through a weekly coffee date and Bible study with her mom.

Keep in mind, too, that teens live in seasons, some of which are very short. What seems like a huge issue today can become no big deal in a matter of weeks. This is all the more reason to take your teen's protestations in stride, rather than turning this into a battle.

No matter what other activities your teen finds for strengthening her faith, make church attendance a non-negotiable. When your teen feels like she has other options, she'll be more likely to join your family for the worship service without too much grumbling.

—Jim Burns is the president of YouthBuilders. Learn more about his work at YouthBuilder.org.

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