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The Secret Life of Christian Teens

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“Why not tell an adult that you have these questions about God’s goodness or about trying to solve your problems through alcohol?”

“Because they’ll get all worried about you and get on your case and give you a big speech.”

“Won’t your friends get on your case and give you a big speech?”

“Yes, they will, but you can stop your friends part way through the speech.”

This snippet of conversation brings us face to face with the secret life of the Christian teen. Despite what adults think – good or ill – about Christian teenagers, most of them keep a world of secrets – good and ill – from the adults nearest to them. What secrets do they keep? From whom? And why? If you give the obvious answers, you will be wrong.
Secrets teens keep

Secrets that Christian teenagers keep from their parents and other adults are as varied as they are. What they keep private falls into some of the most basic of human categories: joys, fears and doubts, and frustrations and sorrows.

JOYS

The teens we consulted find joy in some of the simplest things: food and eating out, sports they play and the church youth groups they attend. Many mentioned the deep joy of friendship. Looking forward to the future gives joy to some, whether they anticipate learning more about areas of their interest, or the university experience.

Teenagers do not keep secret that they tire of school. Yet several of our informants volunteered that they do not want to graduate because they will be separated from friends. That young people find joy in their friends is well known, but still we should not forget it.

Music is one of the joys. Several teens love to sing; a couple mentioned that they sing or hum all day long. Others play musical instruments. These musical activities are not secret, but the joy may be. Although music brings great joy to teens, it also supplies grounds for both internal conflict and for conflict with parents. Many Christian teens find themselves of two minds about non-Christian music. Some think it negatively influences their moral outlook while others believe music makes no difference.

For several, knowing God is a source of joy (and a source of frustration). They speak of his goodness to them, of his faithfulness, of his being a friend they can talk to or count on. The church often falls out of the picture at this point. One of our informants noted that “God is not the God in church, sitting in a box, waiting to strike at any moment.” This young person seems to understand grace although her church may not.

Parents should be happy about the variety of ways in which their teens find joy. But the joys of teens may also have a sobering effect upon adults, because teenagers simply keep secret from many adults close to them that they do find joy in so many areas of life, and because many teens draw a very strong distinction between the God they know in their own lives...
When I go to church and am totally surprised by God, it makes me want to go deeper with God.

Whenever I accomplish something I get this feeling of peace. I get this feeling that someone is encouraging me and saying, “Go ahead and do more. I will help you.”

I would like to be like the ones who are in the middle of the action, but I’m always a spectator. Every time someone gives me a look that’s the least bit weird, I overanalyze it and wonder if there is something wrong with me: “I must be a burden more than a joy to have around.”

I want to be as much like Jesus as possible.

I want to follow God, but sometimes I fail; I can’t control myself.

Why me, God?

I would like to be like the ones who are in the middle of the action, but I’m always a spectator.

Doubts and Fears

Teens today live with a variety of doubts and fears, some of them profoundly deep. Although variety and depth alone do not satisfactorily explain why teens keep them secret, adults who live or work with Christian teens need to remember that much more lies below the surface than above.

“Am I fit, am I beautiful, am I cool?”

Longing for acceptance, and doubts about self-worth run like cables through our informants’ talk. The quotation from a teen in the above heading catches some of that longing and the corollary fear. Teens are smart: they know the difference between mere physical attractiveness and genuine excellence of character; they know there’s more than fit, beautiful and cool, which all lie on the surface. They even know the source of these misimages: the media.

Yet, sadly, attractiveness remains for many the primary source of personal self-worth and therefore of feelings of worthlessness. For some, the fear of rejection stems from feeling that they are not very likeable, that people around them think they’re not worth their time. One subtheme emerges: if people really knew what I was like, they would reject me quickly.

Relationships with Friends and Family

For many teens, self-doubt finds its focus in the context of relationships with friends. Recall that Christian teens fail their friends and have been failed by their friends. One blames herself for failing at relationships... she is afraid to commit herself to other people.

Another concludes that relationships fail because he has something wrong with him. Perhaps more than any other observation, that teenagers suffer from self-doubt is universally acknowledged. Yet, ironically (and painfully for them), teens keep these doubts secret.

Teens often find home a second source of tension in relationships, although the picture varies more here than with friends. Some teens come from families where trust and openness prevail; they have no fear about how family relationships will work out. Others encounter tension on the home front, as often with siblings as with parents.

Relationships with God

Although Christian teens find great joy in knowing God, they also encounter their share of headaches in relation to faith. Our informants all attend one Christian school, and they all volunteered to participate in the research behind this article. Yet, for them, Christian faith comes in a remarkable variety of expressions and forms.

A couple confess to fearing that they will lose their faith completely; others believe that is impossible. Others feel like failures for not telling their friends about their Christian faith. One fears arriving at heaven to have God accuse him of being lukewarm. Another fears seeing friends go to hell.

Several express a strong desire to follow God. One who does admits, “I unfortunately don’t do devotions, though I know I should,” a regret many Christian adults know well.

As with many Christians, some teens would like to put a few questions to God. One wants to know where God was during junior high, when so many things were going wrong with so many people. Another wonders how much control God takes in people’s lives: “I know he could do anything he wants, but I just wonder, how much does he really do?” A third wonders what God really wants. Another simply wants to know if the Bible is true. Christian teens struggle through questions of faith and their relationship with God. Those struggles can become more acute than those...
encountered by typical adult Christians.

To compound the complexity of their faith struggles, many teens have adults nearby who watch their progress. Developmentalists tell us that adolescence is a key time of identity formation. During these years, children raised in religious homes especially will have to take steps - and conduct experiments - to make their parents' religious convictions their own.

For some teens, God is less a problem than are those who claim to represent him. Several express dismay that adults do not make room for Christian teens to find their own way into deeper faith and commitment to God that “people judge you as if you are falling or failing.”

Fears about relationships and struggles with faith intersect for some Christian teens on questions of sexual ethics. They want to know why sex is all right for everyone else but not for them. If they accept that God’s wish for them is to wait until marriage for sex, then they want to know how much sexual activity God permits before marriage. One writes that Christian teens “obviously have had it pounded into us, NO SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE. Duhh, that’s not what this is about.”

Apparently, Christian adults have stated that often enough. But, our informant asks, “What is appropriate and what’s not?” And where parents fail to give their teenagers the resources to deal with the area, these teens are forced, as one puts it, “to discuss sex with God and come to our own conclusions.”

“The problem,” our source continues, “is that when teenagers finally come to their own conclusion, it’s sometimes too late.” If the teen we have quoted is right, then Christian adults have failed today’s teens as thoroughly as previous generations may have failed them.

Some teens have high self-awareness about the genesis and state of their own values and are quite sobered by their own comfort with contemporary morality. One found it “scary how low morals don’t even make me bat an eye anymore.” Another reported how his Christian friends have no problems with the morality portrayed in the movies and on TV.

FEARS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Some the deepest fears of today’s teens relate to the future. Will they arrive safely at adulthood? Will they end up in poverty? Will a family member be killed? Will they lose their Christian faith? Adults recognize these questions, either from their own memory of their teen years or even from their present life.

The very recognizability of the questions may leave adults wondering why teens keep them secret. Nevertheless, some do. Some fears of the future initially seem much more mundane but contain an element of pathos.

One wants to know if he will have a “mediocre life,” another if she will be good enough to live out her vocational dreams.

Education and careers occupy some teens’ distress about the future. What will I do? Am I good enough to do it? Will it work out all right? Once again, every adult knows that such fears and doubts are not unique to teenagers; many experience them throughout their adult lives. Yet many teens bear these doubts alone as an encumbrance of secrets.

Teenagers’ fear of failing in relationships folds into their fear of the future on one question – marriage.
Many teens live with a nagging fear that they will never get married. This fear may find its root in a conviction that no one else shares the same values.

Several express the parallel hope that they will find someone who loves them for the right reasons. But fears about marriage reveal a quiet sadness reminiscent of what we heard about self-doubts: many teens feel that no one loves them or has ever done so. Some think they are, at core, unlovable. Some think they are ugly.

Death figures powerfully in teenagers' fears about the future, certainly for some that they could die themselves, but often that someone close to them might die causing them great loss. Almost all our informants expressed great confidence about the reality of heaven and that they or others go there when they die. Yet, poignantly, one questioned whether the pain of death was worth it.

FRUSTRATIONS AND SORROWS

Today's teenagers experience their share of frustrations and sorrows. Some adults may sometimes come to the conclusion that our parents may be too embarrassed to share their mistakes, but how else can they play the role they need to play?

I get tired of always doing the right things; once in a while I'd like to do something bad.

I sometimes come to the conclusion that our parents may be too embarrassed to share their mistakes, but how else can they play the role they need to play?

FRUSTRATIONS AND SORROWS

Today's teenagers experience their share of frustrations and sorrows. Some adults may want to respond, “Welcome to adulthood.” Nevertheless, some of the frustrations teens experience are particular to their teen years. For example, most adults do not have to endure other adults who yell at them. But teenagers do, with all the accompanying humiliation, from teachers to parents to coaches.

More than one of the young women we talked with experiences frustration about what her church teaches about women and wonders herself how she will make her way in the church given its teaching and practice.

Others struggle with the frustration of loyalty to friends when moral issues are at stake. “I know what he did is wrong; do I tell or not?”

The future reappears here, not as a source of fear this time, but as a source of frustration. “I think God wants me to become a teacher, but at other times I think I should be a missionary.” Readers may see obvious ways of blending the two, but for at least one teen we talked with the choice is a genuine frustration. Many others find themselves in similar quandaries.

Adults may rightly think that most teenagers have not yet suffered loss to the degree they will know within a few decades. Simple chronology and experience tell us as much. But teens have had their share. Losses among those we talked to ran from grandparents through fish and cats to family or friends who died or moved away, to friendships that simply ended, sometimes dramatically, sometimes quietly.

WHO HEARS THE SECRETS AND WHY?

Adults may assume that teenagers keep their secrets only and always from adults. This assumption is wrong in two ways. First, teenagers permit some adults into the loop. Second, teenagers don't necessarily trust their own peers.

Why do some adults get into the loop? A minority of families have built enough trust and openness that the teens in those families do tell their parents what they are thinking, dreaming and doing. More than one of our informants has one or both parents from whom they keep almost no secrets. Others have found a teacher or an adult from their church whom they trust enough to divulge things closest to the bone.

Of course, in many families teens don't tell their parents what they think. If telling about their frustrations, fears or failures leads to punishments, restrictions, “that look,” or “the speech,” then perhaps one can understand a teen's reticence to be forthcoming. But some also keep secret their joys and accomplishments, a barome-

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ter perhaps of a family in difficulty.

In some ways it should not surprise anyone that teenagers let some adults in and keep others out, or that they let some of the peers in and keep others out. They're not so different from adults. One teen asked, “So what's the big deal about teens’ secrets? They probably don't keep any more secrets than adults keep.” It’s a fair comment.

**WHY TEENS KEEP SECRETS**

Teens can offer any number of reasons to keep secret their joys and sorrows. They keep these secrets not only from many adults but also from other teens. Why do teens keep secrets?

First, as we might expect, they experience the same kinds of shyness and embarrassment that adults do. Add to these familiar emotions a generous portion of doubt about self-worth and fear of rejection and then ask again why teens keep their flaws and fears secret. A better question might be why they tell anyone anything at all.

Second, they may gain some measure of personal autonomy by keeping various facts, ideas, and questions to themselves. Adult readers will also recognize this motivation for keeping a secret. Related to autonomy, keeping a secret may be a simple means of retaining some privacy. Most teens live through five days a week characterized by adult regulation. Most have literally a couple of cubic feet of space – their locker – that they can call their own (an idea borne out recently in Canadian courts of law).

Given the rather restrained existence of school-age teens from about 8:30 to 3:30 each day, no one should be surprised that they search for areas of life in which they exercise more control. If anything, adults who live or work with teens should honour their attempts to protect themselves by keeping secrets.

But there's much more to this secrecy than shyness, embarrassment, autonomy or even privacy. Many teens live in fear that if they reveal their failings and doubts to adults they will get “The Speech.” “Drilled into them” was the way our sources described the experience. They suspect that if they express such questions as, for example, those about God’s goodness or about solving problems through alcohol, they will end up in a conversation much more prolonged than they want. And not only will the conversation be long; they expect to be talked down to and to be stereotyped by adults. Perhaps they will get more understanding from a peer than from an adult.

Teens expect to get The Speech in response to any number of things in their lives that they might consider revealing to adults. They feel as though they always have people telling them how to improve and how to change if they want to become better persons. From their perspective, many adults won’t permit them to make mistakes. Adults who try conscientiously to understand how teenagers actually hear The Speech may realize they are wasting their own time. And any benefit the adult gets from feeling better through delivering The Speech most certainly is offset by the response of the teenaged recipient.

Some report getting more than the speech. Teens also fear what one called “three months of adult surveillance." They find it easier simply not to tell than to undergo all the routines that follow the confession of any failing.

For many teens, the most important factor in deciding whom and whether or not to tell is what reaction they think they will get. Will they be judged? Will they likely be treated with understanding and
I have lost every friend I have ever had.

If I have a problem, they will make a big deal about it. Instead of just listening they would want to talk about it long enough that they could solve my problem.

Will you judge me if I tell you?

I would rather tell a friend, "I sometimes fail; would you mind praying for me?"
The conversation would end right there. I would only have to talk for thirty seconds and it would be over.

If I were to tell my parents the same thing I think they would want to talk about it for half an hour; it would be extremely uncomfortable.

Almost all teens have been hurt by lying lies spread about them, usually during their early teens or before. Gossip and rumour-spreading usually diminish by the mid to late teen years, but the fear remains and keeps teens on their guard. The idea that adults are out of the loop and teens are in is very simplistic; the dynamics are much more complex.

WHO CAN BLAME THEM?

Do Christian teens have secret lives? Yes — but no more than most adults. Can you blame them? No. Teenagers let people they trust into their lives, and age is not necessarily the main criterion. The struggles of settling into the particulars of teenage life would make anyone keep lots of secrets.

How should adults respond? The teens speaking here are clear: teens need understanding, love, patience, care and honesty. They want to know that adults will not hear a confession of a failing as confirmation of a stereotype. They especially recoil from the patronizing tone and humiliation of The Speech.

What adult would turn down understanding, love, patience, care and honesty? What adult would ever consider a dressing-down an appropriate reward for taking someone into their confidence? Adults must treat the teens near them with the respect and honesty due anyone created in God’s image. Those who do so will, in due course, be permitted to share in the sorrows and joys of teenagers’ lives.

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