

“In an article written in 2006 for *Christianity Today*, Collin Hansen gave us a framework to understand the contemporary revival of Reformed theology—something so many felt was happening but so few could describe. Now he invites us to journey with him on a voyage of discovery as he travels the nation, learning how our restless youth are discovering anew the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Weary of churches that seek to entertain rather than teach, longing after the true meat of the Word, these young people are pursuing doctrine and are fast becoming new Calvinists. With a keen eye for detail, descriptive analysis, and a strong grasp of theology, Hansen shows where this movement originated, tells who has become involved, and suggests where it may be leading. Any Christian will benefit from reading this book and discovering how God is moving among the young, the restless, and the Reformed.”

—TIM CHALLIES, author, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*;
blogger at Challies.com

“*Young, Restless, Reformed* is the product of some outstanding research by Collin Hansen. Regardless of one’s theological persuasion, this book will help the reader gain valuable insight into the growing Reformed movement in America.”

—JERRY BRIDGES, author of *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“If you think doctrine—particularly the Calvinist kind—is a mere head-trip that undermines evangelism and saps devotion, you need to read *Young, Restless, Reformed*. In his journalistic travels, Collin Hansen has uncovered a fresh movement of young Christians for whom doctrine—particularly the Calvinist kind—fuels evangelism, kindles passion, and transforms lives. Read it and rejoice.”

—DAVID NEFF, Editor-in-Chief, Christianity Today media group

“While other movements have been making a bigger splash in the headlines, a number of strategic ministries have been quietly (and sometimes not so quietly!) upholding the doctrines of grace, planting churches, seeing people converted, teaching the whole counsel of God. These are now beginning to coalesce in a variety of mutually encouraging ways. It is a pleasure to recommend Collin Hansen’s survey of some of these movements. This is not the time for Reformed triumphalism. It is the time for quiet gratitude to God and earnest intercessory prayer, with tears, that what has begun well will flourish beyond all human expectation.”

—D. A. CARSON, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity
Evangelical Divinity School

“Calvinism is more popular today among evangelicals—especially young Americans—than it has been in nearly two centuries. This lively account of its resurgence from an up-and-coming partisan is must reading for ministry leaders working with young adults. There is much that older Christians can do to help the young and restless to mature in Christian discipleship and witness. I pray that Hansen’s book will function, then, as more than a handy digest of the latest trend in our (endlessly trendy) evangelical movement. It is a wake-up call to baby boomers to move beyond the superficial faith they taught their children and to grow with them in the knowledge and love of God.”

—DOUGLAS A. SWEENEY, Associate Professor of Church History,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Young, Restless, Reformed

A JOURNALIST'S JOURNEY WITH THE NEW CALVINISTS



COLLIN HANSEN

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Prologue

Near the beginning of my tenure at *Christianity Today*, the emerging church was all the rage. Editors tended to view this youthful stirring with appropriate skepticism, wondering about the implications of tweaking theology to reach postmodern cultures. Still, emerging leaders such as Brian McLaren built audiences with provocative critiques of modern evangelicalism. After all, emerging Christians are not the only ones who worry that today's church has relaxed standards for holiness and disconnected itself from history. In November 2004 we published a cover story by Andy Crouch, who introduced "The Emergent Mystique." But he did not make many friends within this ill-defined segment when he observed common traits among emerging Christians, such as their careful care for cool hair.

The talk about emerging Christians put me in a difficult spot. As the youngest *CT* editor, I should have known more about this up-and-coming group. On the contrary, I didn't know anyone who was emerging, even though my friends and I had recently experienced the fruits of postmodern relativism in college. We had witnessed the complete breakdown of moral authority and heard apathetic responses to Christian truth claims when we shared from the *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet. Yet we viewed these reactions not as problems with Christianity but as problems with sinners who reject God's grace shown through Jesus Christ.

After one staff discussion about the emerging church, I talked about these experiences with my boss at *CT*. I expressed concern that when *Christianity Today* reports about the emerging church, we might give the impression that this group will become the next wave in evangelicalism. If anything, in my limited sphere I saw a return to traditional Reformed theology. My friends read John Piper's book *Desiring*

God and learned from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. They wanted to study at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and sent each other e-mails when they saw good sales for the five-volume set of Charles Spurgeon sermons.

Maybe that was just our little clique in Campus Crusade for Christ at Northwestern University. Or was it? I started thinking about leading seminaries in the United States and noticed a number of Calvinists in leadership positions. I considered millions of books sold by Piper and his yearly appearances at the popular Passion conference. Yale University Press had just released a major biography of Jonathan Edwards. Reformed theology had recently become a major point of contention in the nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention. Maybe it wasn't just our group.

So I embarked on a nearly two-year journey to discover whether my experiences had been unique or a sign of something bigger. In locales as diverse as Birmingham, Alabama, and New Haven, Connecticut, I sought to find out what makes today's young evangelicals tick. The result should help us learn what tomorrow's church might look like when they become pastors or professors. Even today, common threads in their diverse testimonies will tell the story of God's work in this world.

CHAPTER ONE

Born Again Again

PASSION CONFERENCE

ATLANTA, GEORGIA



Downtown Atlanta was prepared to host the 1996 Summer Olympics. But I don't know if any city is prepared to accommodate nearly twenty-three thousand college students all trying to check into their hotels at the same time. At least not when they show up New Year's Day less than twenty-four hours after the home-state football team won a bowl game in Atlanta's Georgia Dome.

Daunting lines at the Sheraton Hotel ruined my best-laid plans to arrive on time for the opening session of the 2007 Passion conference. The downstairs lobby teemed with college students knitting, chatting, or listening to iPods as they waited in lines that did not move. After a few minutes of moping and fruitless scheming, I determined to make the best of a bad situation. Suddenly the insufferable lines appeared differently—a *captive interview audience*, I thought.

Soon I overheard two young men in the line next to me talking about theology and church. There is no tactful way to butt in on someone else's conversation. So I just asked why they signed up for Passion. The older man said he escorted a group of college students from Florida Hospital Church, a Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Orlando. Among them was Robin Treto, eighteen, a freshman at Seminole Community College. "I'm a John Piper fiend," Robin responded. He spoke excitedly, yet with careful thought for his words.

"He's so Jesus-centered in his preaching," Robin said of Piper. "He doesn't just share anecdotal stories. I look to guys like Piper because he looks to Jesus."

Piper, the best-selling author and pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a Passion fixture. His book *Don't Waste Your Life* emerged from a talk he delivered in front of about forty thousand students for the Passion OneDay event in 2000. But what exactly is a John Piper fiend? Robin apparently listened online to two hundred Piper sermons from the book of Romans alone during just four months. That's a John Piper fiend.

I was curious to learn from Robin how an Adventist student from Florida became such a big fan of a Baptist pastor in Minnesota. Seventh-day Adventists have sometimes worshiped at arm's length from the evangelical mainstream. Robin began to explain that he has only believed in Jesus Christ for a couple of years. Just a few months earlier, Robin would not have been confused by anyone for the type who sits down and listens to hundreds of sermons. Between smoking marijuana and heavy alcohol use, Robin had rebelled against what he described as the legalistic environment at the Adventist church of his parents, who had emigrated from Cuba.

Robin's lifestyle began to change when he was sixteen. The older cousin who introduced him to party life began talking about Jesus. His cousin had been touched by the gospel. Sitting together at his cousin's house, they opened the Bible and read Romans 8 together. Robin was so impressed by the dramatic and unexpected conversion that he patiently heard his cousin out. But the Bible did not make sense to him. Frustrated, Robin left his cousin's house confused. Yet as he sat in his car and prepared to drive away, everything suddenly changed. The words of Scripture began to strike him as true. He understood at once that Jesus Christ had paid the penalty on the cross for his sins and three days later rose from the dead, achieving salvation for those who would believe. In a moment Robin lost his heart for partying but gained a new heart filled with passion for God.

"That's why I have hope for a generation like ours," Robin told me. "The gospel is powerful enough to change hearts."

Robin did not return to his parents' church. But he did not leave Adventism. Shortly after Robin's conversion, a pastor from a nearby Adventist church gave him CDs with conference talks from C. J. Mahaney, a charismatic teacher from suburban Maryland. Mahaney

delivered the messages over the span of six years at the New Attitude conference, launched by pastor/author Joshua Harris for young adults. Robin also listened to some of Harris's talks. During one message, Harris quoted Piper's manifesto, *Desiring God*. This stirring call to "Christian hedonism" argues that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."¹ Piper's teaching about Calvinism squared with Robin's growing knowledge of Scripture.

You will find no explanation and no index entry for Calvinism in *Desiring God*. But it's all there, if you know what to look for. Calvinists—like their namesake, Reformation theologian John Calvin—stress that the initiative, sovereignty, and power of God is the only sure hope for sinful, fickle, and morally weak human beings. Furthermore, they teach that the glory of God is the ultimate theme of preaching and the focus of worship.

Many recognize Calvinism, described by some as Reformed theology, by the acronym TULIP.² You won't find these terms in *Desiring God* either. But you will find the concepts as early as the second chapter. Piper quotes Romans 3:10—"None is righteous, no, not one" (**T**otal depravity). A little later Piper writes, "Regeneration is totally unconditional. It is owing solely to the free grace of God. 'It does not depend on the one who wills or runs, but on God who has mercy' (Romans 9:16). We get no credit. He gets all the glory."³ Here you can see **U**nconditional election and a hint of **I**rrresistible grace. Piper explains **L**imited atonement in a footnote. "All contempt for [God's] glory is duly punished, either on the Cross, where the wrath of God is propitiated for those who believe, or in hell, where the wrath of God is poured out on those who don't."⁴ In a later footnote Piper defends eternal security, or **P**erseverance of the saints, from Romans 8:30—"And those whom [God] predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."⁵

These beliefs didn't go down easy with Robin. He described Calvinism as rough sledding at first. God's sovereignty was a fear-

¹John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 238.

²For a fuller explanation, see Chapter Two of this book, "Out of Bethlehem."

³Piper, *Desiring God*, 64.

⁴*Ibid.*, 296.

⁵*Ibid.*, 302.

some concept. But these fears evaporated as he saw the scriptural basis through positive presentations.

“Guys who taught it to me—Mahaney, Harris, Piper—said it humbly and so passionately,” Robin explained. “They loved what they were talking about.”

I asked Robin how Calvinism meshes with the Adventist church he attends. “It doesn’t,” Robin answered. He spent his first semester of college studying theology at Southern Adventist University in Tennessee. His increasing unwillingness to go along with unique points of Adventist theology led to conflict with faculty. He returned home to Orlando rather than cementing an unwanted reputation as the only non-Adventist theology major.

But if he’s not Adventist, why does Robin still attend an Adventist church? Because that’s where he can make a difference and maybe even teach others with his Calvinist theology. Besides, since Adventists meet on Saturdays, he can spend his Sunday mornings in Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Florida, where R. C. Sproul preaches. He first heard about the famed Calvinist teacher when he read Sproul’s classic *The Holiness of God*. He was thrilled to learn that Sproul, a Presbyterian, preaches in the Orlando area. Robin considers Sproul to be the best Bible teacher in town. “But I skip the first thirty minutes,” Robin clarified. He arrives just in time to miss the traditional music but still catch the sermon. That’s no surprise. Sproul doesn’t exactly share a taste for the modern praise music that unites the college students at Passion.

“We wait all year to worship like this,” Robin said of Passion.

If Calvinism finds renewed interest among the young, you cannot understand that resurgence without understanding Passion. Not that Passion proclaims Calvinism by name. Piper doesn’t know what Passion founder Louie Giglio believes about Reformed theology. But he does know that Giglio adores the glory of God and desires to spread God’s renown around the world. And Giglio doesn’t protest what Piper teaches the students. That’s good enough for Piper.

“I’m sixty. What am I doing at Passion?” Piper asked when we met at his home. Unlike Giglio, an athletic man who wears tight-fitting, hip T-shirts, nothing in Piper’s appearance or dress would indicate popu-

larity among youth. Though obviously fit and healthy, Piper does not cut a strong physical presence. Unlike his dynamic, intense preaching style, he spoke to me in a friendly, calm manner. But do not mistake friendly with jovial. Talking for about two hours over dinner, he spoke with quiet seriousness. He looks like a college professor with tousled thin hair and glasses. Actually, he did teach at Bethel College (now university) in Minnesota until 1980 when he moved to Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Piper may not know what he's doing at Passion, but it's obvious to students such as Robin why he fits with Passion. Piper lends academic weight, moral authority, and theological precision to the conference. More than that, Piper shares Passion's overarching vision. Worship songs from Charlie Hall and Chris Tomlin, preceding talks by Giglio, pound home two themes beloved by Calvinists—God's sovereignty and glory. From there, Giglio encourages students to devote themselves to evangelism and global missions by pointing to the transcendent God of heaven. His appeals go something like this: God is wonderfully, inexpressibly glorious. You are not. But how amazing is it that the very God of the universe invites screwed-up people to give their lives in sold-out service to his eternal kingdom!

Piper attributes the growing attraction of Calvinism to the way Passion pairs demanding obedience with God's grandeur. Even without an explicitly Calvinist appeal, Passion exemplifies how today's Calvinists relate theology to issues of Christian living such as worship, joy, and missions. "They're not going to embrace your theology unless it makes their hearts sing," Piper told me.

This positive, transformational view of theology might be why so many young evangelicals today hum along to TULIP. Even ten years ago, Piper's ensemble boasted far fewer singers. You don't need me to tell you that Calvinism has a bad reputation. If you consider yourself an Arminian, the rival to Calvinism that emphasizes free will over God's sovereignty in salvation, you bristle at teachings such as limited atonement and irresistible grace. With the feel of a beleaguered minority, even proponents sometimes apologize for Calvinism.

"Calvinists have certainly not stood out in the Christian community as especially pure people when it comes to the way they behave,"

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, writes in *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*. “They have frequently been intolerant, sometimes to the point of taking abusive and violent action toward people with whom they have disagreed. They have often promoted racist policies. And the fact that they have often defended these things by appealing directly to Calvinist teachings suggests that at least something in these patterns may be due to some weaknesses in the Calvinist perspective itself.”⁶

Other than endorsing racism and murder, Calvinism is great, Mouw seems to say. And this comes from someone who considers himself a Calvinist. Mouw writes, “While I sincerely subscribe to the TULIP doctrines, I have to admit that, when stated bluntly, they have a harsh feel about them.”⁷

Harsh is how most Christians—indeed, most evangelicals—probably feel about the Puritans, among history’s most accomplished Calvinists. Oliver Cromwell exemplifies the Puritan cause in Britain. He ruled the isles from 1649 to 1658 after Puritans and their allies beheaded King Charles I. Textbook writers gloss over Cromwell’s contemporaries, including spiritual giants John Owen and Richard Baxter. In America, far more recall the 1692 witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, than later Calvinists who led explosive revivals (George Whitefield) or achieved theological genius (Jonathan Edwards, best known for his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”).

Already by the early 1800s during the Second Great Awakening, Calvinism had sustained some serious blows. Infighting plagued the successors to Edwards in New England. Many Southern Presbyterians defended slavery using Scripture. Renowned evangelist Charles Finney, meanwhile, claimed the Reformed heritage but turned many of its teachings upside down.

More recently, Calvinism lost favor as the church growth and charismatic movements swept through American evangelicalism. Church growth principles urged a focus on common-denominator Christian basics, not including doctrines such as predestination. Fast-growing Pentecostal and charismatic churches trace their roots to

⁶Richard J. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 114–115.

⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

the Wesleyan/holiness tree. To be sure, Calvinism never went away. But it did remain largely quarantined among the ethnic Dutch in the Christian Reformed Church or the Princeton Presbyterians who built Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

When I first wrote for *Christianity Today* in September 2006 about the resurgence of Calvinism among young evangelicals,⁸ I heard from many pastors, theologians, and lay leaders in these traditional communities. “Um, hello!” they gently reminded me. “What about us? Don’t call it a comeback, Hansen. We didn’t go anywhere!” Duly noted. Yet for a tradition that claims John Calvin and Martin Luther, Reformed theology had shriveled into a gaunt caricature of its former self. Who but the gallant few at Banner of Truth kept Puritan writings in print? Who but theologians J. I. Packer and R. C. Sproul convened audiences interested in Reformed theology? Who but the small circle of founders-friendly churches recalled that Calvinists founded the Southern Baptist Convention?

Even these stalwarts likely never envisioned that today Sovereign Grace churches pair charismatic worship with Calvinist theology. They still don’t know what to make of the radical church planters who fly the Reformed banner as they employ missional evangelism techniques. They probably never expected a pastor with such definite, controversial views to be warmly received by more than twenty thousand college students who dig modern praise music. These are a few of the leads I pursued to learn about the reasons for the latest Calvinist comeback.

After Joshua Harris attended Passion in 1999, he sought Giglio’s help to plan a similar event, from which blossomed the current version of his New Attitude conferences. Harris, the thirty-three-year-old senior pastor of Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, is widely known for his best-selling book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. But dating polemics take a backseat these days to leading a thriving church at the heart of the growing Sovereign Grace church network. The compassionate, soft-spoken Harris told me he found Giglio’s God-centered focus at Passion to be refreshing. “What I grew up with was so man-centered,” Harris said. “It was all about you and what you do and what

⁸Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, Reformed,” *Christianity Today*, September 2006, 32; <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html>.

you accomplish. Even the songs we sang were so self-centered about God: ‘Do this for me.’”

It’s pretty common to hear Reformed leaders lament modern praise music. They bemoan forgotten hymns, shallow theology, and repetitive refrains. But you won’t hear Piper complain—at least not about the good stuff. “The worship songs that are being written and sung today are about a great God,” he said. “They have set the stage for the theology. I still don’t understand why many churches don’t follow that with preaching that gets the theology of the songs. But at least for the Passion movement, that music is very God-exalting. The things that nineteen-year-olds are willing to say about God in their songs is mind-boggling.”

Piper could be thinking about a number of songs belted out by the throngs that packed Atlanta’s Phillips Arena, normally home to professional basketball and hockey franchises. I considered Chris Tomlin’s “Indescribable”: “All powerful, untamable, awestruck we fall to our knees as we humbly proclaim you are amazing God.” I also recalled one of my favorite songs, “Wholly Yours” by the David Crowder Band: “I am full of earth, you are heaven’s worth; I am stained with dirt, prone to depravity; you are everything that is bright and clean, the antonym of me, you are divinity.”

These songs from Passion artists illustrate the conference’s picture of a transcendent God, untamable and wholly unlike us. With intimate knowledge of our depravity, we respond by falling to our knees—actually at Passion students are more likely to raise and wave their arms. Those physical acts of worship alone prove that these students don’t act like Baptists from previous generations. As I watched Passion, I couldn’t help but wonder, don’t many of these students attend churches where pastors sound a lot like therapists and teach that God just wants us to do good and feel good about ourselves? Some even attend churches that promise health and wealth for faithful believers. If so, why do these youths sing songs about depravity?

Maybe you can only survive so long on a self-help diet. Eventually you get pretty sick of yourself. A biblical understanding of God—big beyond description, active, perfectly holy—tastes much better than junk-food pop psychology. Imagine that this transcendent God still condescended to save his disobedient people. Because he so loved the world, this God

of the universe dressed in flesh and suffered on the cross. Yet he did not stay in that tomb. The power of God raised Jesus Christ, who made a way for us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever if we only believe. Transcendent, yet immanent, he transforms us, and then he employs us in transforming the world to renew his creation. For students at Passion, the biblical picture of God feels new, appealing, and exciting.

“I do wonder if some of the appeal [of Calvinism] and the trend isn’t a reaction to the watered-down vision of God that’s been portrayed in the evangelical seeker-oriented churches,” Joshua Harris told me. “I’m not trying to knock them, but I just think that there’s such a hunger for the transcendent and for a God who is not just sitting around waiting for us to show up so that the party can get started.”

Many churches geared toward so-called spiritual seekers focus on God’s immanence, his nearness. They talk about a personal relationship with Christ, emphasizing his friendship and reminding audiences that God made us in his image. It all makes sense, because so many baby boomers left churches that felt impersonal and irrelevant. But the culture has shifted. Fewer Americans now claim any church background. Evangelical megachurches, once the upstart challengers, have become the new mainstream. Teenagers who grew up with buddy Jesus in youth group don’t know as much about Father God.

“We live in a transcendence-starved culture and a transcendence-starved evangelicalism,” said Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. “We’ve so dumbed down the gospel and dumbed down worship in a good effort to reach as many people as we can that there’s almost a backlash. It comes from this great hunger for a genuinely God-centered, transcendence-focused understanding of who God is and what God wants us to do and what God has given us in Jesus Christ. All of that resonates deeply with a kind of pastoral Reformed position that Piper articulates so well.”

Indeed, Calvinism puts much stock in transcendence, which draws out biblical themes such as God’s holiness, glory, and majesty. Think of the prophet Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6:1: “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” In Piper’s preaching and Passion’s music, beholding God’s transcendence helps us experience

his immanence or nearness. This powerful combination at conferences like Passion blows apart stereotypes of Reformed theology as cold and detached study of God.

“Someone like Louie Giglio is saying, ‘You know what, it’s not about us, it’s about God’s glory, it’s about his renown,’” Harris said. “Now I don’t think most kids realize this, but that’s the first step down a pathway of Reformed theology. Because if you say that it’s not about you, well, then you’re on that road of saying it’s not about your actions, your choosings, your determination.

“If you believe that ultimately it is your action, your choosing, your decision—that ultimately your salvation finally gets back to you—that’s going to turn into a very moralistic kind of religion,” Harris said. “That’s why a lot of people I hear from who discover Reformed theology talk about it almost like they got saved for the first time.”

A note of caution is in order. If we are to believe history’s most thorough study of teenagers’ religious attitudes, moralism is still winning. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, the sociologists who conducted that survey, argue that a new religion has supplanted Christianity in America. This religion teaches that “God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process,” Smith and Denton argue in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.⁹ They call this religion Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Smith and Denton, sociologists with the National Study of Youth and Religion, offer a grim diagnosis. “It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized,” they write. “Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”¹⁰

Oddly enough, Smith and Denton found that most teenagers like church and appreciate their parents. But hundreds of phone surveys

⁹Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2005), 165.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 171.

and more than two hundred and fifty face-to-face interviews revealed that astonishingly few teenagers can articulate even the basics about their religious beliefs. The students aren't dumb. According to Smith and Denton, they speak intelligently about drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases, for example. Catechesis isn't dead after all. It's just that many churches and families have ceded this responsibility to public schools. As a result, teenagers can express a deep understanding of toleration but not of justification. They know the problems of teenage pregnancy but do not fear the God who commands holiness.

The raw statistics make you wonder what's going on in evangelical youth groups. Around one-third of the surveyed conservative Protestant teenagers affirmed belief in fortune-tellers, reincarnation, and astrology.¹¹ More said many religions may be true (48 percent) than affirmed the exclusive truth of one religion (46 percent). Teenagers may like church, but they don't think it's important—64 percent of conservative Protestants responded that believers need not be involved in a religious congregation in order to be truly religious or spiritual.¹²

“What legitimates the religion of most youth today is not that it is the life-transformative, transcendent truth, but that it instrumentally provides mental, psychological, emotional, and social benefits that teens find useful and valuable,” Smith and Denton write.¹³ They note that almost none of the teenagers talked about God's sovereignty.

If my investigation would find a resurgence of Calvinism, then something must happen to these students after high school. Smith and Denton offer some clues. They found that teenagers have the desire but not the opportunities to learn from adult role models. Rather unreluctant, these teenagers will respond to challenging guidance from caring adults—the kind of messages delivered by John Piper at Passion, for example. Piper struck a nerve in 2000 when he challenged his largest audience—about forty thousand students gathered outside Memphis, Tennessee, on a blustery May day—not to waste their lives pursuing the American dream. The resulting book, *Don't Waste Your Life*, has sold more than 250,000 copies.

Smith and Denton write, “We suspect that there are opportunities

¹¹Ibid., 44.

¹²Ibid., 74.

¹³Ibid., 154.

to show youth how very conventional they are actually acting, how unexciting they are in their approach to faith, to create discomforts to motivate them to more seriously engage what faith is and might be in their lives.”¹⁴

They warn middle-aged religious leaders not to expect today’s youth to think and behave as they did in the more tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. “[O]ur findings suggest to us that religious communities should also stop—again, as we not infrequently observe—presuming that U.S. teenagers are actively alienated by religion, are dropping out of their religious congregations in large numbers, cannot relate to adults in their congregations, and so need some radically new ‘post-modern’ type of program or ministry.”¹⁵

So what do they need? Though it may be dominant among today’s American teenagers, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism cannot save. As evangelicals graduate from high school and leave the churches of their youth, many end up at conferences like Passion or New Attitude and begin to be transformed by the transcendent God they behold through Reformed theology. I suspect that Calvinism strikes a chord with these college-age students precisely because Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has infiltrated so many evangelical youth groups.

In offering this hypothesis, I speak with some experience. I had been a Christian for about two and a half years when I arrived in Evanston, Illinois, in 1999 to study journalism at Northwestern University. During my last two years in high school I had helped lead United Methodist Youth Fellowship at my family’s small church in rural South Dakota. The denomination even paid for me to fly to Los Angeles to attend a conference for youth considering full-time ministry.

All the while, my knowledge of Scripture grew little. Sin plagued me with guilt, and I saw little victory over temptation. I’m glad neither Smith nor Denton called to ask me what Christians believe. Yet I knew without a doubt that I had been saved. I recalled with joy the moment my resistance fell and I trusted in Christ to forgive me of my sins. I knew God gave his church the Bible so that we might know about Jesus

¹⁴Ibid., 268.

¹⁵Ibid., 266.

and learn the story of salvation. I actively shared with unbelieving friends and family about the joy God had given me.

Even before I enrolled, I confirmed that Campus Crusade for Christ ran a chapter at Northwestern. I harbored no false expectations about the climate for Christians at this school that long ago ditched its Methodist roots. I hoped Crusade would help me grow in the faith and introduce me to other students trying to follow Christ. Crusade did that—and much, much more. Our campus director studied for his Master of Divinity degree up the road at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Most Crusade students attended a nearby Evangelical Free church, pastored by a Trinity grad. My first morning in church, the pastor rocked my Methodist sensibilities. It wasn't so much the sermon's content that shocked me. Rather, I was surprised the sermon contained any content at all. On top of that, the pastor even raised his voice a few times and preached for more than thirty minutes. That kind of behavior gets you fired by Midwestern Methodists.

I had never heard of Calvinism until a Crusade friend, also a Methodist, told me she believed that God predestines salvation. Before long that's what I believed too. My weekly Bible study with fellow freshmen worked through Romans. An older student took me to hear R. C. Sproul preach. I didn't go looking for Reformed theology. But Reformed theology found me. Beginning college as I did with an almost blank slate, Calvinists impressed me with their knowledge of Scripture and devotion to theological depth. Calvinism made the best sense of what Scripture teaches about salvation. None of this theology seemed to dampen my friends' passion to evangelize the campus and consider serving as missionaries after graduation. As I began teaching Bible studies and mentoring younger students, we discussed Calvinism.

One day between classes I sat eating in a dorm with one of my friends and his academic adviser, a history professor. We began talking about the Puritans and Calvinism—surely the only time this has happened to him before then or since. I professed, “I am a Calvinist.”

“Wow!” the professor exclaimed. “I didn't know any of them were still alive.”

He proceeded to argue away my Calvinism. He asked how I could reconcile God's sovereignty with free will. He prodded me to see if I thought

God orchestrated the Fall in the Garden of Eden. It wasn't a fair fight. I couldn't match this professor who teaches about intellectual history.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have answers for any of your questions," I responded sheepishly. "I merely believe Calvinism comes closest to honoring the teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul."

"Oh, if that's your criteria," the professor said, "then you're right."

Believe it or not, that's not the only time Calvinism came up with a professor. During my senior year Northwestern hired a visiting professor to teach about American evangelicalism. More than a hundred and fifty students filled the classroom. About half considered themselves evangelicals and participated in the activities of Crusade or InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, among other groups. During the course's first lecture, the professor, an evangelical himself, surveyed American religious history. Calvinists dominated the First Great Awakening, concentrated in New England, he explained. But their rather frightening view of God dissipated a few decades later during the Second Great Awakening.

"Now only a few Calvinists remain—mostly a few crazies in Grand Rapids," the professor said to classroom laughter.

Taken aback, I approached the professor during the class break. I told him I could point out a number of Calvinists in the room that very day. And I explained that a growing number of Calvinists studied at Trinity, a seminary he had attended decades earlier. What did he make of my pleas? Nothing, really. I was just a student whose name he would never remember. The nation's best universities pay him to teach about evangelical history, culture, and politics.

What I found while investigating youth trends and Calvinism may shock my college professors. It may even surprise a number of evangelicals who don't see the appeal of this difficult theology with a bad reputation. Based on conversations about my previous writing, I know this book will surprise many young Calvinists themselves. As I experienced with our small movement at Northwestern, few have ever viewed these trends from a wider scope. Many who heard Piper speak at Passion and bought *Desiring God* probably never realized they are traveling down a path trod by many of their peers. But they may recognize themselves in these stories of conversion—born again by the power of God, then transformed by the mystery of grace.