

7 ^{XXXXXX} MYTHS
ABOUT MODERN-DAY
CHRISTIAN
CAMPING

7 MYTHS ABOUT MODERN-DAY CHRISTIAN CAMPING

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So you have a teenager in your home, and summer will be here before you know it. Summer brings a break from school, raising questions about how to use all that extra time. Or more importantly, questions about how to avoid frittering away all that extra time on useless activity. Most parents of teenagers that I know try to be very intentional about using summer in a purposeful way. Family vacation will factor into the equation. Maybe a summer job will come into play—to pay for looming car expenses. An online class might give a leg up in school, maybe even earn some college credits. No doubt, there will be additional church activities and maybe a summer sports league or two. But what about sending your teenager to a Christian camp this summer? Will that be a factor in your planning? If not, should it be? Maybe you've had a bad experience with a Christian camp in your past—or, perhaps, more recently. Or maybe you've inadvertently come to believe some things that simply are not true about Christian camping today. Before planning out your teenager's summer, take a few minutes to skim through these **7 myths about modern-day Christian camping**. You just might be surprised...

Myth #1:

Camp is an outdated relic of a bygone era.

Youth camping stands as a uniquely American tradition. And, by our young country's standards, it is an old tradition. Some have traced the first organized youth camp as far back as 1861—that's during the Civil War!¹ Other camps in the northeastern United States soon sprang up, offering boys in particular a chance to experience the rigors of outdoor life.² Around 1900, the Salvation Army pioneered the establishment of "fresh air" camps specifically designed to help poor, urban children.³ Also around the turn of the century, agencies such as the Boy Scouts and the Campfire Girls began establishing summer camps. For example, YMCA, Camp Dudley is thought to be the oldest American summer camp still in operation today: it was founded in 1885.⁴

These early youth camp efforts were not particularly concerned with spiritual instruction, but in those days, American society embraced a generally, Christian worldview by default. That meant Christian teaching naturally came with the package of camping. However, by the turn of the century, America began to embrace religious diversity and secularism, causing Christian leaders to consider new outlets for developing the faith of younger generations. Many of them turned to youth camping. By the 1940's various denominations were developing their own camping traditions, including Methodists, Presbyterians, Wesleyans, and Baptists. In an article for the American Camp Association, Nancy Ferguson and Jennifer Burch summarize the thinking of these groups succinctly: "Although camps were understood not to be a replacement for Sunday school, the outdoor setting, the twenty-four-hour-a-day schedule, and the opportunity to live in Christian community all made them a valuable supplement to church-based Christian education of children."⁵ Youth camping became more organized and structured in the 1960s and 1970s, and the tradition has remained strong in America for well over 100 years.



This raises a question: why did so many believers in the past commit to youth camps in the first place? Whether or not one fully agrees with the doctrine or methodology of these early camp enthusiasts, the following goals should still resonate with Bible-believing Christians.

Why did so many believers in the past commit to youth camps in the first place?

- 1) They saw the faith of young people being undermined by the increasingly hostile barrage of secular society.
- 2) They saw unhealthy detachment from nature as America became more urbanized.
- 3) They saw a world full of distractions pulling the focus of young people away from God.

As you read through those three statements ask yourself this question: are our teenagers today still facing these challenges?

In looking to answer this question, consider your own experience in American society: do you see it becoming less secular—or less hostile to believers? Young people today are likely to face intense cultural pressure to join the growing ranks of the religious “nones,”⁶ a category that some already estimate to be as high as 26% of Americans.⁷ Concerning detachment from nature, the urbanization trend that began with the industrial revolution has continued steadily so that in 2020, 82.7% of the population of the United States live in cities. According to the US Census Bureau, only four states still have a majority of rural residents.⁸ And as for distractions, teens today face a dizzying array of alluring diversions: think social media, streaming services, addictive video games, and cell phones. Even secular sociologists are concerned about the potential damage of perpetual screen time for young people.⁹ If anything, the original purposes of youth camping seem more pertinent than ever.

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Is summer camp the end-all solution for all of these daunting challenges? Of course not. Parents bear the ultimate weight of bringing up their children *in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*,¹⁰ which includes counterbalancing these pressures in the lives of their teenagers. But can summer camp serve as a positive influence toward God and away from the world? Absolutely. Christian camping pulls young people out of their relentless routine. It provides an opportunity to set aside distractions for a time in order to focus on important questions about God and His Word. Being surrounded by nature can remind them of the greatness and goodness of their Creator. And interaction with committed believers in a wholesome setting can give encouragement that they are not alone in their struggles. Far from being an outdated relic of a bygone era, the purposes of modern-day Christian camping still ring true today.



Myth #2:

Camp is rustic.

For some, the word “camping” conjures up images of long-distance hiking and carrying everything on your back that you need to survive for a week. It involves starting your own fire, boiling water from a stream, and catching, killing, and roasting your own supper (OK, maybe not that extreme). For others, camping means living without electricity and running water in a rough, log cabin in a pine forest with fresh air breezing through open cracks in the walls (along with various species of insects!). Certainly, some youth camps preserve the tradition of “roughing it” to various degrees, seeking to develop stamina and character in young people by toughening them up with elements of pioneer life.

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Can I share a secret with you? I really don't enjoy that kind of camping. At all. Long story on that—not to be shared in this format. My idea of “roughing it” is a decent hotel or resort within comfortable reach of the out-of-doors. And I'm guessing that most modern teens would agree with me on that. Thankfully, many Christian youth camps have left “rustic” in the past—along with the parachute pants, Jelly Shoes, and mullets of the 80s (aren't we glad for that!). Gone are the days of washing in a cold mountain stream and sleeping on hard ground. Hot showers and decent mattresses are now the norm. Many teens have been surprised to discover that camp food is actually, well, good. Sometimes you can even find air conditioning and a gourmet coffee shop! For better or worse, as our culture has grown more comfortable, so have camp accommodations.

Those parents who live by the adage of “kids these days have it way too easy” or “when I was your age, camp was camp” may want to look for other options for toughening up their offspring. However, we've found that most parents don't seem to mind their teens enjoying a few “creature comforts” even during summer camp. So, while teens should not expect a 5-star resort experience when they arrive at camp, it definitely won't be “roughing it.” In fact, if they forget their toothbrush or deodorant, the camp store is always available to bail them out. You really can't call most modern teen camps primitive—and that's a good thing!



Myth #3:

Camp is dangerous.

Question: What do poisonous snakes, rabid raccoons, and hungry bears have in common? Answer: You are not likely to meet any of them during a week of summer youth camp. All joking aside, because most summer camps have moved away from wilderness style camping (see Myth #2), wild animals tend to stay far away from the bustling activity of summer camp. (Although teens will likely encounter roving gangs of pesky squirrels!) On the rare occasion that a wild critter wanders into the camp area, the staff will be on high alert. Stinging insects like yellow jackets and hornets might be a problem when traipsing cross country through the woods, but well-used trails and paths can easily be kept clear of such hazards. Being outside more than usual, a teen at camp may experience sunburn or mosquito bites, but nothing that some cooling, topical ointment from the camp nurse won't ease.

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But what about the danger of high-risk activities? Many camps offer young people the opportunity to participate in exciting adventures that they won't normally experience back home. Activities like rock climbing, high ropes courses, horseback riding, or ziplines. And what about the risk that comes with water-related activities? Isn't all of this dangerous? Certainly, these experiences do come with an element of risk greater than what they would encounter at school, for example. But careful camp staff are well aware of these inherent risks. That's why they go to such great lengths to implement meticulous safety procedures for all camp activities. These measures include regular equipment inspections, operator instruction and certification, trained lifeguards, and close supervision during use. And these precautions work! Of course, there's always a chance of scrapes and bruises or a sprained ankle, but teens run that risk when participating in any contact sport like basketball, soccer, or wrestling with annoying siblings.



But there are other risks to consider as well. What about bullying? What about abuse? In this day and age, a conscientious parent will do everything possible to avoid putting their teenager in a position of risk. Vigilant camp staff fully agree. That's why they require background checks and references for all staff who have contact with campers. That's why they train their staff about appropriate behavior toward minors, such as never being alone in a room with them—ever. That's why they provide training about signs of bullying and what to do about it. While no camp can guarantee the prevention of peer-to-peer bullying, proper safeguards go a long way in stopping it before it happens.

If you aren't sure about the safety and protection procedures of the camp you are considering for your teenager, contact them and ask some informed questions:

- » Are criminal background checks performed on all personnel?
- » What kinds of references does the camp require?
- » What training do staff members receive about child sexual abuse?
- » Under what circumstances are staff members allowed to be alone with a camper?
- » Who is responsible for enforcing existing camp rules and regulations?

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If that camp does not provide adequate answers to these kinds of questions, it may be best to look elsewhere for your camp experience.

But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater! Every year in America, it is estimated that approximately 8 million young people attend summer camps. The vast majority of these campers enjoy a safe and enriching experience—to the point that they return for more, summer after summer, and may even wish to serve on staff at a camp. While it is impossible to provide a 100% risk-free environment, responsible camps go to great lengths to keep every camper safe. They take the trust of parents very seriously.

The background of the top section of the page is a collage of US dollar bills, including a prominent \$100 bill featuring Benjamin Franklin. The bills are slightly faded and overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent rectangle.

Myth #4:

Camp is overpriced.

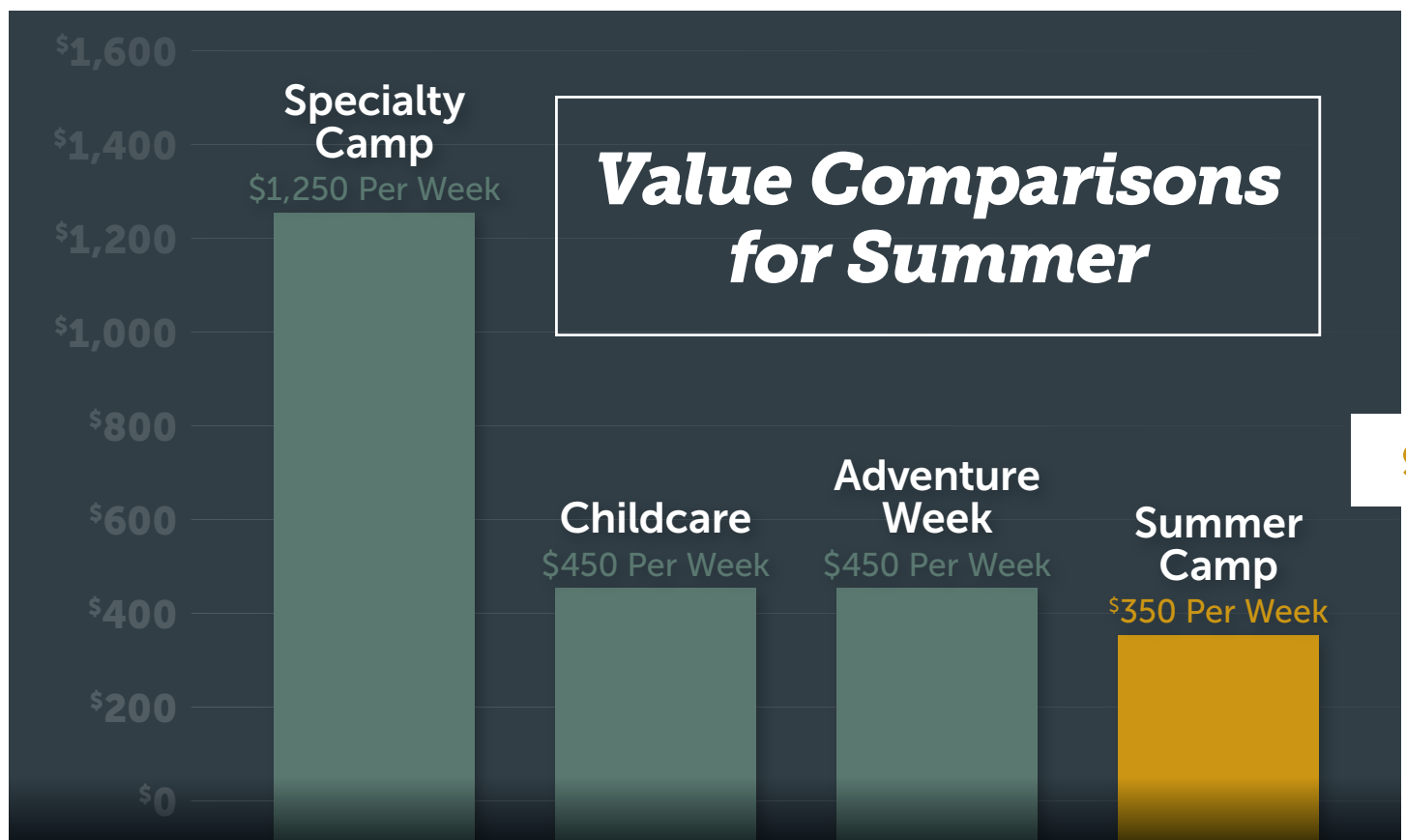
Let's do some math. How much does it cost to feed a teenager for a week? Well, obviously that depends on the teenager and whether they are going through one of those "eat everything in sight" growth spurts that parents know all too well. Other factors in arriving at this figure include inflation and location: eating in a restaurant or at home. So let's just settle on a conservative number of \$7 per meal. That would end up being around \$100 for 5 days of meals—not including the perpetual fridge raiding that happens in between meals.

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Now let's think about a vacation for a family of four. Maybe you get a ridiculous deal on a mountain resort at \$125 a night (not including taxes, resort fees, etc.) That would be \$625 for a week of lodging. Pull out one-fourth of that for a rounded down total of \$150 a person. But no one wants to sit around a hotel room all day while on vacation. So you decide to rent mountain bikes for a day—at \$90 per person. And do a canopy zipline tour for \$100 each. And buy a souvenir. And, and, and—you get the idea. Parents know how quickly vacation costs with teens add up. Before you know it, you've spent well over \$500 per person for a week away from home. Please don't think I'm questioning the value of family vacation—building family memories together is always money well spent!

But in terms of monetary value, think about the benefits of having food, lodging, and a wide range of activities rolled into one price. Add in the personal attention of a trained counselor. Plus the spiritual benefits of a passionate and insightful teen speaker. Sometimes a parent may balk at the cost of Christian summer camp—especially if they have more than one teenager—but camp actually represents outstanding value.

Christian camps have worked especially hard to keep the cost of camp down, born out of a desire to allow as many young people as possible to experience the impact of summer camp. According to the 2018 American Camp Association Business Operations Report, “resident camp tuition averages can be \$630 per week up to \$2,000+ a week.”¹¹ For example, in 2021, YMCA camps in Western North Carolina averaged \$850 for a week of camp.¹² Most Christian camps charge far less than that—lower cost even than sports day camps that include only one daily meal! Additionally, some Christian camps are able to offer discounts or financial assistance for families who are not able to afford the camp fees.



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Setting aside the number crunching for a bit, consider the value your teenager will experience when attending a Christian camp centered on the Word of God. Yes, there are physical benefits of fun-filled and exciting activities that they can’t experience at home, but there are also social benefits. Building friendships with teens from other churches. Spending time with a godly college-aged counselor who cares about them. Rubbing shoulders with other committed Christians. Consider also the spiritual benefits. Time set aside to focus on worshipping God. Absorbing teaching from the Bible that is given in a way that teens can relate to. Encouragement to pursue God in the more intentional way. How do you assign a value to that kind of experience? No, I think it is safe to say that camp is not overpriced.

Myth #5:

Camp is a conspiracy to undermine local churches.

OK, so maybe this myth isn't as wide-spread as some of the others on this list, and possibly people don't actually think that Christian camps are part of an organized conspiracy. But these concerns have been raised, and maybe you share them. Most likely, this perception is sourced in the past. In the earlier days of camping, many camps sprang up to engage young people for many good reasons (see Myth #1). But many did so independently of local church involvement resulting in Christian camps with few ties to local churches or maybe only a loose affiliation with a particular denomination. As these camps grew and became more established, some of them adopted the mentality of "you churches exist to support us!"

This misguided thinking revealed itself in a variety of ways: recruiting campers through any means available, diverting funding away from local church giving, funneling gifted workers away from local church service, and expecting churches to follow their lead in areas of extra-biblical methodology. Sadly, they got it backwards:

a Christian camp exists to serve and support local churches—not the other way around.

The local church was God's idea. He established it as "the pillar and ground of truth."¹³ Jesus promised to build His church¹⁴—not His camp!



Thankfully, there has been a healthy shift in thinking among many parachurch ministries over the past decade, resulting in a restored understanding of the place and purpose of a camp¹⁵—not as an end to itself but as a helper coming alongside to assist churches in their God-ordained mission to carry out the Great Commission.¹⁶

Far from undermining churches, a camp with a biblical perspective will seek to encourage and support God's chosen institution as much as possible. They pursue this goal by listening to the needs of churches (especially concerning their young people), deferring to churches on controversial issues, majoring on the gospel and sound biblical doctrine, communicating to and through local churches, and making sure that young people are connected to a good local church as they go home from camp. If you are concerned about how the camp you are considering for your teenager views local church ministry, just ask some questions. I trust you will find them to be highly supportive of God's institution, the local church!

Myth #6:

***Camp is a Neverland vocation
for slightly zany people who
don't really want to grow
up and get a serious job.***

Well...OK, so this isn't actually a myth.

Guilty as charged.



A leather backpack and a Bible are resting on a wooden dock. In the background, a calm lake reflects the surrounding green trees under a soft, overcast sky.

Myth #7:

Camp offers minimal long-term significance for young people.

Years ago, a missionary started a Christian camp in Bangalore, India. During the first camp, two young men responded to the gospel and were saved. The following year, they both returned to camp and devoted their lives to serve the Lord. Soon afterwards, they were baptized and joined a local church. More than 10 years passed before we learned “the rest of the story:” both of those young men went on to attend Bible college and became pastors in a rural part of India. God used camp to impact those two young men at pivotal times in their lives—and then He used those two young men to impact many others for His Kingdom. They continue to use Christian camping in their ministries today.

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But does God use camp in similar ways in America? Definitely! This is not an isolated story. Church congregations across America are sprinkled with believers who came to Christ while attending camp when they were younger. Some people in full-time vocational ministry began moving in that direction as a result of a decision made at camp. (I personally fit that description!) Many other believers took a significant spiritual step of some kind at camp. And this fruit remains today.

Having been involved in camp ministry in various ways for most of my life, I’ve heard the same criticisms of camping that you have. “Camp decisions” are often referred to with disdain. “They don’t last—just wait and see.” “That teen just made an emotional decision—give it a few weeks and it will wear off.” “That’s just campfire Christianity—wait until you get back to the real world.” Perhaps they have a point?

Actually, I'll be the first to admit that Christian camps have historically tended toward shallow decision-making: generic and endless invitations, speakers using emotional tactics of manipulation, or well-meaning counselors rushing a decision without testing for genuine understanding. No doubt, these tendencies have resulted in confusion or insincere commitments. Thankfully, many camps have taken appropriate steps to address these issues. Even so, there are times when a teenager will make an emotional decision at camp. Certainly, many young people return home with sincere intentions only to slide back into well-worn paths of habit (a pattern that we parents sadly understand all too well!).

But that doesn't mean that commitments made at camp are without value. Maybe we need to realign our expectations for camp to a more biblical understanding of spiritual growth. A Christian camp is positioned to walk alongside of teenagers for a short time, giving them the same message of hope that they receive at home: that genuine spiritual change is possible because of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Coming away to camp provides an excellent opportunity for young people to step back and consider their lives and their walk with the Lord—to ask questions and hear answers from God's Word. Camp can be a wonderful, God-ordained opportunity for a young person to take another step or two on the long road of progressive sanctification.¹⁷ And while we recognize that "camp decisions" are not the end all, we also understand that they can be a good starting point. Rather than looking for a massive spiritual leap, camp can provide a nudge in the right direction, clinging to the promise that God will continue to work in the eternal soul of that teenager no matter where their path leads.¹⁸

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In short, spiritual decisions at camp can play a small but important part in moving a young person closer to Christ, encouraging them in their life-long pursuit of God.

And whenever long-term change does take place, either at camp or at home, it will be because of God's Word. From personal study and memorization, to small group discussion, to peer-to-peer interaction, to Scripture-filled singing, to timely messages delivered in a way they can relate to, God's Word *will not return void*.¹⁹ This is what camp is all about: an excuse to give young people the Word of God in a loving way! So don't underestimate the impact that a godly nudge in the right direction can make at a pivotal time of life. Camp does offer significant benefit for young people—long-term impact that lasts a lifetime—and beyond.



So maybe you found your thinking challenged about one of these common myths of modern-day Christian camping.

I hope so! But don't take my word for it—this is an excellent opportunity to do your own research about these questions—or others that are on your mind. Find a Christian camp that looks like it might be a good fit with your own parenting values, and ask them some questions. I have a feeling that you might be surprised at what you discover. I know that we at The Wilds would be more than happy to have that conversation with you. Why don't you see if one of our camping programs is a good fit for your teenager?

For more information about our camping opportunities for teens, please visit **www.wilds.org** or **www.thewildsofnewengland.org**.

Or if you have further questions, please reach out to me at **whitepaper@wilds.org** or **wilds.org/email/whitepaper**.

Hoping to see you soon!



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