

IDEAS

The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church

The defining problem driving people out is ... just how American life works in the 21st century.

By Jake Meador



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Nearly everyone I grew up with in my childhood church in Lincoln, Nebraska, is no

longer Christian. That's not unusual. Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That's something like 12 percent of the population, and it represents the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history. As a Christian, I feel this shift acutely. My wife and I wonder whether the institutions and communities that have helped preserve us in our own faith will still exist for our four children, let alone whatever grandkids we might one day have.

This change is also bad news for America as a whole: Participation in a religious community generally correlates with better health outcomes and longer life, higher financial generosity, and more stable families—all of which are desperately needed in a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness, and alcohol and drug dependency.

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A new book, written by Jim Davis, a pastor at an evangelical church in Orlando, and Michael Graham, a writer with the Gospel Coalition, draws on surveys of more than 7,000 Americans by the political scientists Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe, attempting to explain why people have left churches—or “dechurched,” in the book’s lingo—and what, if anything, can be done to get some people to come back. The book raises an intriguing possibility: What if the problem isn’t that churches are asking too much of their members, but that they aren’t asking nearly enough?

The Great Dechurching finds that religious abuse and more general moral corruption in churches have driven people away. This is, of course, an indictment of the failures of many leaders who did not address abuse in their church. But Davis and Graham also find that a much larger share of those who have left church have done so for more banal reasons. The book suggests that the defining problem driving out most people who leave is ... just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn’t set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of


community that don't contribute to one's own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one's children. Workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn't add up.

Numerous victims of abuse in church environments can identify a moment when they lost the ability to believe, when they almost felt their faith draining out of them. The book shows, though, that for most Americans who were once a part of churches but have since left, the process of leaving was gradual, and in many cases they didn't realize it was even happening until it already had. It's less like jumping off a cliff and more like driving down a slope, eventually realizing that you can no longer see the place you started from.


Consider one of the composite characters that Graham and Davis use in the book to describe a typical evangelical dechurcher: a 30-something woman who grew up in a suburban megachurch, was heavily invested in a campus ministry while in college, then after graduating moved into a full-time job and began attending a young-adults group in a local church. In her 20s, she meets a guy who is less religiously engaged, they get married, and, at some point early in their marriage, after their first or second child is born, they stop going to church. Maybe the baby isn't sleeping well and when Sunday morning comes around, it is simply easier to stay home and catch whatever sleep is available as the baby (finally) falls asleep.

In other cases, a person might be entering mid-career, working a high-stress job

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requiring a 60- or 70-hour workweek. Add to that 15 hours of commute time, and suddenly something like two-thirds of their waking hours in the week are already accounted for. And so when a friend invites them to a Sunday-morning brunch, they probably want to go to church, but they also want to see that friend, because they haven't been able to see them for months. The friend wins out.

After a few weeks of either scenario, the thought of going to church on Sunday carries a certain mental burden with it—you might *want* to go, but you also dread the inevitable questions about where you have been. “I skipped church to go to brunch with a friend” or “I was just too tired to come” don't sound like convincing excuses as you rehearse the conversation in your mind. Soon it actually sounds like it'd be harder to attend than to skip, even if some part of you still wants to go. The underlying challenge for many is that their lives are stretched like a rubber band about to snap—and church attendance ends up feeling like an item on a checklist that's already too long.

What can churches do in such a context? In theory, the Christian Church could be an antidote to all that. What is more needed in our time than a community marked by sincere love, sharing what they have from each according to their ability and to each according to their need, eating together regularly, generously serving neighbors, and living lives of quiet virtue and prayer? A healthy church can be a safety net in the harsh American economy by offering its members material assistance in times of need: meals after a baby is born, money for rent after a layoff. Perhaps more important, it reminds people that their identity is not in their job or how much money they make; they are children of God, loved and protected and infinitely valuable.

But a vibrant, life-giving church requires more, not less, time and energy from its members. It asks people to prioritize one another over our career, to prioritize prayer and time reading scripture over accomplishment. This may seem like a tough sell in an era of dechuraching. If people are already leaving—especially if they are leaving because they feel too busy and burned out to attend church regularly—why would they want to be part of a church that asks so much of them?

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Although understandable, that isn't quite the right question. The problem in front of us is not that we have a healthy, sustainable society that doesn't have room for church. The problem is that many Americans have adopted a way of life that has left us lonely, anxious, and uncertain of how to live in community with other people.

The tragedy of American churches is that they have been so caught up in this same world that we now find they have nothing to offer these suffering people that can't be more easily found somewhere else. American churches have too often been content to function as a kind of vaguely spiritual NGO, an organization of detached individuals who meet together for religious services that inspire them, provide practical life advice, or offer positive emotional experiences. Too often it has not been a community that through its preaching and living bears witness to another way to live.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas captured the problem well when he said that “pastoral care has become obsessed with the personal wounds of people in advanced industrial societies who have discovered that their lives lack meaning.” The difficulty is that many of the wounds and aches provoked by our current order aren't of a sort that can be managed or life-hacked away. They are resolved only by changing one's life, by becoming a radically different sort of person belonging to a radically different sort of community.

Last fall, I spent several days in New York City, during which time I visited a home owned by a group of pacifist Christians that lives from a common purse—meaning the members do not have privately held property but share their property and money. Their simple life and shared finances allow their schedules to be more flexible, making for a thicker immediate community and greater generosity to neighbors, as well as a richer life of prayer and private devotion to God, all supported by a deep commitment to their church.

This is, admittedly, an extreme example. But this community was thriving not because it found ways to scale down what it asked of its members but because it found a way

to scale up what they provided to one another. Their way of living frees them from the treadmill of workism. Work, in this community, is judged not by the money it generates but by the people it serves. In a workist culture that believes dignity is grounded in accomplishment, simply reclaiming this alternative form of dignity becomes a radical act.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells his first disciples to leave their old way of life behind, going so far as abandoning their plow or fishing nets where they are and, if necessary, even leaving behind their parents. A church that doesn't expect at least this much from one another isn't really a church in the way Jesus spoke about it. If Graham and Davis are right, it also is likely a church that won't survive the challenges facing us today.

The great dechurching could be the beginning of a new moment for churches, a moment marked less by aspiration to respectability and success, with less focus on individuals aligning themselves with American values and assumptions. We could be a witness to another way of life outside conventionally American measures of success. Churches could model better, truer sorts of communities, ones in which the hungry are fed, the weak are lifted up, and the proud are cast down. Such communities might not have the money, success, and influence that many American churches have so often pursued in recent years. But if such communities look less like those churches, they might also look more like the sorts of communities Jesus expected his followers to create.
