

According to authors Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan Burge, about 15% of American adults have dechurched, meaning that they've stopped attending church once a month and now attend less than once a year. Now before we continue to explore this trend, let me invite you to consider that this does not mean those individuals are not Christian. And it does not mean they have lost their faith or have been kicked out of church. They are simply the dechurched, and their number is huge: More than 40 million Americans.

Most likely you are aware that seats are empty in churches across the country, in large part because of this exodus. In fact, Pastors Jim Davis and Michael Graham explore this trend in a book called *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* They write, "More people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening and Billy Graham crusades combined." And unsurprisingly the trend has impacted practically every congregation, hitting every age category, from evangelicals to Catholics to mainline Protestants. The median congregation in the United States now has 65 people, down from 137 just two decades ago.

One man left the church because of a pastor's sermon. "What was it?" asked a friend. "Babylon," the man said. The friend was confused. "The pastor preached on Babylon?" "No, I'm talking about the pastor's delivery: Babble on and babble on."

In today's gospel story from Mark, Jesus predicted that change would come to the religious institutions of his day. As he came out of the temple in Jerusalem during the last week of his earthly ministry, one of his disciples said, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked, "Do you

see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Although we don't know which of his twelve students pointed out such an obvious observation, perhaps it was Nathanel who was known to speak his mind, the disciple was right to say, “what large stones.” After all, the foundation stones of the temple, which are still visible today in the Western Wall, are probably the largest building stones in the ancient world. The smallest stones are between two and five tons, and the largest is estimated to weigh 570 tons.

The stones above the foundation really did come down: “Not one stone will be left here upon another,” Jesus said; “all will be thrown down.” And in the year 70 A.D., the Romans attacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Many people were killed or enslaved, and the treasures from their place of worship were stolen. The destruction of the temple at that time was one of the greatest tragedies of Jewish history, and it caused Jewish and Christian residents of the city to scatter. You could say that these people were *detempled*. But unlike today, their change in religious activity was forced upon them.

After walking to the Mount of Olives, across from the temple, a group of disciples asked Jesus privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Jesus replies, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” Yes, many violent and upsetting events were going to come upon them, and their lives would be threatened. But Jesus ended on a hopeful note, saying, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Yes, birth pangs. Jesus knew that the detempling would be painful, but there would also be hope for a new birth. In fact, the Jewish faith was completely

reshaped by the destruction of the temple, forcing Jews to shift their worship into synagogues led by rabbis. Christianity also became more congregation-focused, because followers of Jesus could no longer gather in the temple as they did in the earliest days of the church. The book of Acts tells us that the first followers of Jesus “spent much time together in the temple . . . broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

Without a temple, both Judaism and Christianity had to focus on worship and fellowship in congregations outside of Jerusalem. And as painful as the destruction of Jerusalem was, it set the stage for both faiths to become global religions. Which, perhaps, is a good thing for us to consider as we ponder our own future as followers of Christ in this day and age.

So, what is going on in the American church? No Roman army has attacked us, but still, we are scattering. The Covid-19 pandemic had a devastating effect, keeping people away from church buildings for a year or so, and many Christians fell out of the habit of attending worship. Some left because of church scandals. Others departed because they felt like they didn’t fit in, their friends were no longer there, or they did not feel much love in church.

A woman named Kristen Fowler of Kentucky was raised going to church every Sunday. But she says she no longer goes as an adult, because “*the views of the church ... just don’t align with my views.*”

Bill Fowler, a man living in Oregon, was also raised in a church, but “had a falling out with the local church because sermons were becoming overly political.”

And Brigette Bishop of Massachusetts grew up going to church every week. She taught Sunday school, sang in the choir, and was even a church organist. She stopped going to church in her 30s because they hurt her so deeply. “I got

postpartum psychosis after the birth of my second child,” she says, “and the pastor of the church we were attending accused me of being possessed by a demon.”

Although the reasons for people dechurching may vary, the losses are consistent and real. And yet, despite these departures, there is reason for hope! Today’s dechurching may be part of the “birth pangs” that will create the church of the future. According to *The Washington Post*, evangelicals are looking for friendship, while mainline Protestants and Catholics are looking for spiritual practices and outreach programs. Many of the dechurched are seeking stable and healthy congregations that find a way to avoid the polarization affecting churches and other institutions.

The bottom line is this: The church is not a building, constructed of large stones that can be thrown down. Instead, it is a stable and healthy community of faith. Pastors Davis and Graham say that congregations need to work on “relationship wisdom” and a “quiet, calm, and curious demeanor.” Church leaders need to be quick to listen and slow to speak. The path toward new life “is not easy,” they say, “but it is simple.”

Yes, birth pangs are not easy. In fact, they are incredibly painful. But the path to life is quite simple, if the church is willing to listen to people, respect different points of view, work on developing friendships, and offer spiritual practices and outreach programs.

In a radio interview, Graham offers a vision for ministry that could really help us in the future. He says that when we put the kingdom of Jesus first, “that allows us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It allows us to love our enemies, and it allows us to live in the sacrificial way that he did. In Jesus’s kingdom, the last are first, and the first are last, and that is the opposite of the American story.” Graham goes on to say that “we have an opportunity to be radically countercultural and

really care for people, particularly the least of these people who have really fallen through the cracks and people who are suffering.”

He’s right. The church that needs to be born today is one in which we really love our neighbors, and even our enemies — and the people across the political aisle with radically different points of view. It is a church that focuses on living in the sacrificial way that Jesus did, with outreach programs that serve a world in need. Such a church will be made up of followers of Christ who develop friendships and really care for people, particularly those who are suffering and in tremendous pain. This new church can be like the old church of the book of Acts, in which Christians “broke bread at home ... praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

A woman from Los Angeles who called into the Radio program featuring Graham said that she still identifies as a Christian, but she left the church because it no longer seemed to reflect Jesus. Having heard too much in church about “going to hell” and “needing to repent,” she said, “I just don’t feel that is the Jesus I know, it’s not the God that I know, it’s not the Christianity that I have come to find and was raised in. And I would personally, honestly, I would love to go back to church.”

So, can we help create a new church for this woman, and for others who have dechurched? With the Spirit of God leading us, can we continue to work on becoming a more stable and healthy community of faith? Can we truly be a congregation that reflects Jesus, loves people, and engages in sacrificial service? Over half the people who left the church are willing to come back if they can find a true expression of Christianity. And that’s the church we need today, on the other side of the “birth pangs.” Amen.