

The Great Dechurching

Session Two – Engaging the Dechurched

INTRODUCTION

The sole resource for this report that will provide the background for our discussion on March 16, 2025 is the book, *The Great Dechurching – Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* By Jim Davis and Michael Graham with Ryan P. Burge. The parenthetical numbers refers to the page numbers of the book.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BELIEF, BELONGING AND BEHAVIOR

51 percent of the dechurched evangelicals surveyed said they will one day return to church, 18 percent are “very willing,” and 33 percent are “somewhat willing.” (p. 120) this is a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak outlook with tens of millions of people leaving the church in the last 25 years. If the church is to respond well to those willing to return to the church, then we need to consider the important sociological categories of belief, belonging and behavior.

Belief

We would be wise not to interact with the dechurched as we might with our unchurched friends, assuming they have no faith. (p. 122) Many dechurched people have faith and many are very orthodox in their beliefs; their reason for dechurching is not their beliefs in God, Jesus the Christ or the Holy Spirit but rather with the church.

It is important that we remember that dechurched people believe and know that their beliefs are important and good for them, much in the same way that we all know that going to the gym and working out is good for us. The issue is that we need to build relationship with people and not simply invite them to come to church but invite them into a relationship. “We aren’t just telling them they should go back to church; we are inviting them into our lives, which included church.” (p. 123)

Belonging

Belonging is the primary pain point that many dechurched people experience. (p. 123) Belonging is the greatest felt need of dechurched people. There are two questions we need answered when engaging with

dechurched people are 1) What made you leave? and 2) What would entice you to come back?

Answering these two questions is not enough. We need to understand the answers to these questions. We need to first ask ourselves if our church operates more like an event or a family. (p. 126) Second, if we are experience the belonging Jesus intends for his people, are we calling our friends into it as well? (p. 127)

Behavior

One of the first things the researchers for this book noticed from the data was a similar inconsistency between what people believe and what they do – their behavior. (p. 127) “Eleven percent of the dechurched evangelicals in our study indicated that the church was too restrictive of their sexual freedom.” (p. 127) Many of the people who dechurched over this issue are simply products of the church’s inability to engage this issue well. (p. 128)

The issue of behavior goes both ways. We not only have the challenge of addressing behaviors outside the church; we also have to address them inside the church. Many dechurched people cite hypocrisy as one of the reason they dechurched. Much of this criticism of hypocrisy is aimed at parents.

Belief, Belonging And Behavior Are Connected

The Christian life is holistic. Our beliefs create belonging and dictate behavior. It is impossible to hold any two at the exclusion of the third. If we claim to believe and belong but our behavior is lacking, our faith is dead according to James 2. If we claim to believe and behave but to not belong, we become a long ranger Christian. If we claim to belong and behave but do not hold to the fundamental beliefs of our faith, we don’t belong to the faith. (p. 129-130)

RELATIONAL WISDOM

When we zoom all the way out among all 40 million people who have dechurched, one problem that become clear from our survey data is relational incompetence in the ways both churched individuals and churches themselves relate to person at risk of dechurching. (p. 133) The good news is that we can grow and change our ways of relating to others.

Six Key Awarenesses

God-Awareness

The opening paragraph of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* begins with this profound insight: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." (p. 134-135) Our need for having a robust awareness of God cannot be understated. To understand that God wants all of humanity to be saved, that is whole and at peace, is critical to relating to the dechurched and to take seriously their issues with the church.

Self-Awareness

We can have a healthy self-awareness only if we first have a profound awareness of God. If we aren't aware of God in our interactions with the dechurched, we might lack self-awareness by esteeming ourselves too much and thinking the re-churching of those around us depends solely on us (p. 136) Self-Aware persons will seek clarity in communication with others to remove any obstacle to clarity of the gospel. It is important to remember that "People aren't projects; they are human beings who bear the image of God." (p.136)

Other-Awareness

The most natural fruit of God-awareness and self-awareness is others-awareness. (p. 137) An awareness of others is characterized by an understanding of what is important to those around us and of how they see the world. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:5-6)

Emotional Awareness

In our pandemic age when anxiety and depression abound due to loneliness and seclusion from relational connection, and when news sources and social media can so easily leave us in a state of heightened anxiety and angst, it is hard to understate the importance of our emotional awareness in how we relate to the dechurched. (p. 139) Our awareness of both ours and others' emotional states can have a big impact on how we deliver the gospel and how it is received.

Awareness of how Others Perceive Us

We would all be well served by the ability to jump into someone else's shoes to see how they experience us. If they experience us as being awkward, cringey, inappropriate, intense, uncomfortable, or any number of other unhelpful things, we would likely make important changes to our approach and engagement. (p. 140) An important distinction needs to be made between being transparent and being vulnerable. When we are vulnerable, we allow people to speak into what they observed when we were transparent with them. Remember, two ears and one mouth.

Cultural Awareness

Perhaps the most natural outgrowth of having a rich awareness of others is that of having a growing cultural awareness. (p. 142) Sometimes cultural awareness involves big ideas and factor, and other times it just means actively thinking about others and finding ways to show deference honor and respect. A high level of cultural awareness creates the cultural humility required for deeper connection through established trust. (p. 144-145)

Quiet, Calm Curiosity

What will it look like when we possess all six of these awarenesses? The simplest way it should look is quiet, calm curiosity. Our goal is not to argue people into the kingdom of God. A genuinely curious posture helps others feel heard, understood, and safe. (p. 145)

THE MISSED GENERATIONAL HANDOFF

The passing of our faith from generation to generation used to be almost assumed, but today the success rate of that handoff is plummeting. (p. 148) As far back as Moses, God's people have been commanded to love God and pass on his love. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The three stages when it is most difficult to hold on to the faith and when the generational handoff is most often missed are the high school years, the four years after high school (usually in college), and the early years of becoming established in a new career or vocation. (p. 152)

While we can view this handoff as the passing of a baton in a relay, a better image may be three generations of family building a house.

The truth is our children and grandchildren are growing up in a completely different world than we did. America of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s encouraged people to be a part of a church in a way that it no longer does. (p. 163) Young people need churches that are more serious about securing souls than filling up seats. They need pastors who help them to follow Jesus. Young people need real answers to their questions. We need to invite them to build something beautiful together.

MESSAGES FOR THE DECHURCHED

This whole book came from a desire to get better at engaging people who are dechurched casualties and many more who have causally dechurched. So, how do we engage? *Helpfully*. That is the operative word. (p. 164)

Acts 17 gives us the account of Paul at the Areopagus, the hill of the Greek god Ares, in Athens, a main location for pagan worship. Paul used a model of discourse that can be described as comprehend, commend, and then critique. (p. 164)

This chapter of *The Great Dechurching* deals with several issues that must be addressed and the messages we can share with the dechurched.

The Political Issue

We know that many Americans have left the church because of political disagreements. They haven't just left *a* church; they left *the* church. Eighteen percent left because of political disagreements with the congregation. Sixteen percent left because of political disagreements with the clergy. (pp. 166-167)

The fact is the gospel comes with an ethic, that is, guidance in how we behave and treat each other. The issue is applying Paul's method of comprehend, commend and critique.

The Hurt Issue

There are many stories we must hear in order to comprehend the scope and depth of the hurt that has driven people from the church. The commend portion of Paul's method would most often involve our authentic commendation about people's courage in sharing their hurts.

The final critique is people do not have to return to what they left! (p. 171)
This is where we can authentically share the gospel with our desire to connect with God and Others and offer them a different experience of the Kingdom of God; an experience that is based on Christ's love and our acceptance and inclusion!

The Streaming Issue

A 2022 Pew research pole discovered that 21 percent of practicing Christians are only worshiping online. (p. 171) This is where I (Pastor Jack) depart from the analysis of the authors of *The Great Dechurching*. They write, "We have enough data now to see that streaming fuels consumeristic church, enables laziness, and fools people into thinking they're being nourished and built up. Online church is the CliffsNotes of worship. It's a cheap substitute." (p. 173)

Although online church lacks the "human touch and presence" of in house worship, I don't agree that it's a cheap substitute. Online worship simply is what it is, to over use a common comment. Enough said.

The Abuse Issue

This issue is one of great betrayal on the part of the church across many, if not all, denominations. Think through Paul's method of Comprehend, Commend and Critique on this issue. We're talking about a deeply involved and painful journey for people to travel back to the church.

"People who dechurched because of abuse need to hear that the protection, integrity, and justice they desire is what Jesus desires as well, and that there is a church nearby where they can not only be safe but be a real part of bringing safety to those who need it the most." (p. 178)

The Isolation Issue

The authors approached this issue from their perspective that isolation is primarily the result of busyness. I'm not sure that perspective offers a full depiction of the issue of isolation. I do agree with their stance that the church needs people who have dechurched with all their insights, gifts and graces. We are not fully "we" without them! (p. 179)

The Belief Issue

“The largest reason people gave for leaving the church (23%) was a change in belief of some kind. They may have left a church for good reasons.” (p. 180)

I believe that Waterford Central Church is poised to welcome many who have left other churches because of their shift in beliefs. Our understanding of the gospel is one of inclusion and welcome, of seeking Shalom (wholeness and peace with oneself), and it is good news!

CONCLUSION

We have work to do! In order to welcome back the dechurched we need to authentically listen to them, be curious about their reason for dechurching and offer our fellowship as one where together we can build a more vital and meaningful family of faith.