

LEAVING INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

February 2, 2025

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Luke 9:23-25

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

REFLECT & DISCUSS

1. Read the passage slowly. Then take a deep breath and read it again. What word, phrase, or image stands out to you?
2. Religion in the US is undergoing a seismic shift. Not only is there a meteoric rise in people describing themselves as "none" (no religion in particular), but also more than 40

million people have "de-churched". This means 40 million people who used to attend a worship service once or more each month, now attend once or less every year.

- a. Why do you think people quit attending church?
 - b. Do you know someone (or have you been someone) who dechurched? What do you know about their story and their reasons?
3. Why do you engage in the life of a church?
 4. Surprisingly, research indicates that one of the main reasons people leave church is because... **they move**. Why might it be hard to find and get connected into a church after moving to another neighborhood, city, or state?
 5. Another surprisingly pedestrian reason people leave church: transitions in family life, especially becoming "empty nesters" (kids leave home for work, school, or to begin a family of their own). Reflect on why such life transitions might be ripe occasions for disconnection and dechuraching.
 6. People are also increasingly distrustful of "institutions." This can be traced through the sentiment of "spiritual but not religious." What is it about church *as an institution*

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that is challenging, problematic, or depleting?

7. A church can't help but be "an institution." But being *institutional* is about making the institution the center of the story. In a time of declining church attendance and decreasing influence, one of the temptations for a church is to anxiously seek a programmatic fix or new strategy for institutional survival.
 - a. How might Jesus' teaching in the scripture passage challenge this?
 - b. What does it mean for a church to quit focusing on its own survival?
8. Church can be *institutional* (about itself and its own survival), or it can be *missional: following the mission and example of Jesus*. Recall what Jesus preached in Luke 4:14-20 as his mission statement: heal, liberate, empower, and bring good news to impoverished people.
 - a. How might this connect to what Jesus was teaching his disciples: "Those who lose their life for my sake will save it"?
 - b. Why might a church that's focused on healing, liberating, empowering, and bringing good news *to others* be something that people want to join and participate in?

9. Who can you invite to church not because the church needs it, but because they might find the community, healing, freedom, empowerment, or good news they need? Make a plan to invite this person to church with you.
10. Who do you know that you haven't seen in church for some time? Make a plan to reach out and listen to what's going on in their life. Ask how you can be praying for them this month.

February's sermon series will be exploring the "rise of the nones" and "the great de-churching." To learn more about these seismic shifts in US religious life, check out the resources and links below:

[ON POINT interview](#) with Michael Graham and Jim Davis, co-authors of *The Great Dechurching*.



Ryan Burge is an American Baptist Pastor and professor of political science who has become the "go-to guy" for presenting and interpreting the data on changes in religious behavior. [His substack "Graphs about Religion" includes graphs, commentary, and highlights.](#) You can also read, listen or watch an [interview he gave on "the nones"](#).



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