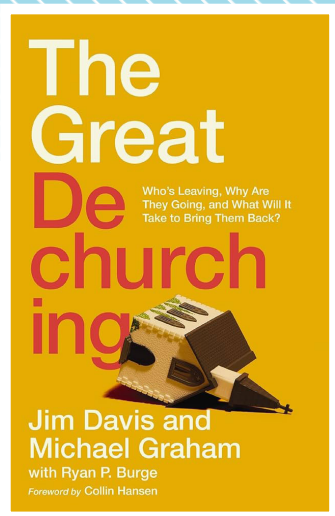
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Meg Rooney



The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?

By Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge

About the Authors

Jim Davis (MDiv, Reformed Theological Seminary) is an author, teaching pastor at Orlando Grace Church in Altamonte Springs, Florida, and host of the "As in Heaven" podcast. He is also a council member of the Gospel Coalition.

Michael Graham (MDiv, Reformed Theological Seminary) is program director for The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. He is also the executive producer and writer of the "As in Heaven" podcast.

Dr. Ryan P. Burge (PhD, Southern Illinois University) is an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, teaching in American institutions in the areas of political behavior and research methods. He looks at the intersection between religiosity and political behavior within the American context. Burge is the author or co-author of four books, including *The Great Dechurching*, and has written for the *New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, Vox, The Wall Street Journal, POLITICO*, and more. Burge has also appeared on *60 Minutes* with Anderson Cooper. For over 17 years, he has served as a pastor in the American Baptist denomination.

About the Book

The largest and fastest religious shift in U.S. history is greater than the First and Second Great Awakenings and every revival in our country combined...but in the opposite direction. Yet precious little rigorous study has been done on the broad phenomenon of "dechurching" in America. Jim Davis and Michael Graham have commissioned the largest and most comprehensive study of this phenomenon by renowned sociologists, Dr. Ryan Burge and Dr. Paul Djupe. *The Great Dechurching* takes the insights gleaned from this study to drill down on how exactly people are dechurching with respect to beliefs, behavior and belonging.

This book gives the church in America its first-ever deep dive into the dechurched phenomenon. You'll learn about the dechurched through a detailed sketch of demographics, size, core concerns, church off-ramps, historical roots and the gravity of what is at stake. Then you'll explore what can be done to slow the bleed, engage the pertinent issues winsomely and wisely, and hopefully re-church some of the dechurched.

Questions for Conversation

PART I: MEET THE DECHURCHED

1. In Chapter 1, authors Jim Davis and Michael Graham introduce the dechurched as a population of Chrisitan worshipers that no longer attend church regularly. Throughout the chapter, they argue that this rapid dechurching shift seriously impacts families, friendships, churches, denominations, networks and other communities. Which group covered resonates with you the most? Where have you noticed a dechurching, and what has been the impact or the growing concern?
2. According to Davis and Graham, dechurching is happening everywhere for various reasons. From age to denomination to income level to political affiliation, Americans have decided not to attend church. Does this notion surprise or challenge you? Why or why not?
3. Despite the common belief that secular higher education negatively affects Christian faith, Davis and Graham argue that the opposite may be true. They write "that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to see the social value in religion, believe in institutions, and have higher levels of interpersonal trust" (29). Have you witnessed or experienced their argument in highly educational spaces? What makes sense or doesn't make sense about this argument?
4. In addition to education, the relationship between income level and dechurching is surprising. Davis and Graham show us that those with higher income levels have greater church involvement than lower income level folks. What do you think is the primary inhibitor of those who don't attend church due to lower income? What can the church do to engage those with lower income status?
5. Mental health is another important factor in the great dechurching. With the general mental and emotional benefits of church attendance in mind, why do you think those with mental health illnesses are less likely to attend church? How has been the relationship between the church and mental health issues in the past?
6. What was your response to the presence of the secular right? Did it surprise you that right-wing American evangelicals are more likely to dechurch than left-wing American evangelicals? Why or why not?

PART II: PROFILES OF THE DECHURCHED

1. According to Davis and Graham, there are five typical profiles of the dechurched: Cultural Christians, Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals, Exvangelicals (or those who have left Christianity), Dechurched Black, Indonesian, People of Color (BIPOC) and Dechurched Mainline Protestants and Catholics. Do you identify with one of these profiles? Why or why not? Do you agree with Davis' and Graham's descriptions of one or more profiles? Why or why not?
2. What is your reaction or response to Cultural Christians? What resonated with you about this group? What did not? What do Davis and Graham suggest to meet the needs of Cultural Christians?
3. What is your reaction or response to Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals? What resonated with you about this group? What did not? What do Davis and Graham suggest to meet the needs of Dechurched Mainstream Evangelicals?
4. What is your reaction or response to the Exvangelicals? What resonated with you about this group? What did not? What do Davis and Graham suggest to meet the needs of Exvangelicals?
5. What is your reaction or response to the Dechurched BIPOC? What resonated with you about this group? What did not? What do Davis and Graham suggest to meet the needs of Dechurched BIPOC?
6. What is your reaction or response to the Dechurched Protestants and Catholics? What resonated with you about this group? What did not? What do Davis and Graham suggest to meet the needs of Dechurched Mainstream Protestants and Catholics?

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PART III: ENGAGING THE DECHURCHED

1. In Chapter 8, Davis and Graham highlight the hopeful observations from their research in local congregations and ministries with the sociological categories of belief, belonging, and behavior. Which of these categories was the most encouraging for you regarding addressing dechurching within congregations? How have these categories challenged what you thought about the dechurched population?
2. Davis and Graham write: "People are asking more pragmatic, existential and aesthetic questions as post-modernity, secularism and other complex sociological, economic, political, psychological and technological forces have them increasingly fractured culturally, relationally and individually. People are longing for a better self, city, country and world, and nobody seems to have the answers" (134). Does this statement resonate with you? Why or why not? Have you felt these questions come up for you as these forces become more apparent? Why or why not?
3. Throughout this book, we are encouraged as ministers and followers of God to grow in relational wisdom and maturity. Davis and Graham note that six key awarenesses help us grow: of God, of self, of others, of our emotions, of how others perceive us and of culture. In which section do you do well? With which section do you struggle or need growth in?
4. As Davis and Graham note, possessing these six awarenesses aims to find quiet, calm curiosity. They write: "Our goal is not to argue people into the kingdom of God" (145). How does quiet, calm curiosity feel to you? Do you think it would resonate with the dechurched population? Why or why not?
5. In Chapter 10, Davis and Graham write about the "missed generational handoff." Have you noticed this phenomenon in your community, church or close relationships? Why do you think the three difficult stages in which to hold onto faith or pass it on are the high school years, the four years after high school and the early years of becoming established in a career or vocation?

PART IV: LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH

1. Davis and Graham note three questions the church must ask to prevent dechurching: Does the church have a process for moving people out of the community; does the church have a process for moving people into the community; and, does the church provide training on how congregants can have spiritual and gospel-related conversations in their everyday lives? How does your church respond to these questions?
2. What do Davis and Graham argue are the main inhibitors to spiritual formation growth with the dechurched? Which example do you experience the most in your everyday life? Which one is less frequent? How do we overcome these factors, according to Davis and Graham?
3. What are the differences between a confession-only church and a mission-only church? What do each of these kinds of churches miss that can be found in the other? What is needed to bring a confessional and missional church together?
4. In Chapter 14, Davis and Graham use Acts 11:19-30 to discuss six biblical truths about living in exile that can help us navigate the great dechurching. What are these six biblical truths, and how do they help us navigate this shift? Is there a biblical truth that resonates with you? Is there one that doesn't?
5. In Chapter 15, Davis and Graham discuss five exhortations to church leaders. What are these exhortations? Which exhortation surprised, encouraged,and/or challenged you? Why?
6. What are your final takeaways from *The Great Dechurching*? What was well-explained in the book? What needs more development? What questions were left unanswered?