Why Are So Many Christians Quitting Church?

Over the last decade many Christians have given up on church—often because leaders failed them. Is there any chance those leaving through the back door will return?

Like many charismatic Christians, Bob* (not his real name) has given up on church—at least for now. The first congregation he attended closed after two years when the pastor was caught stealing money from a church account. When Bob joined a second church he was pressured by leaders to attend two membership classes a week in order to be a part. When he balked at the demands, he was told he was "rebellious."

Bob left that church wounded and disillusioned. He avoided his Christian friends for a few months, wondering if he even belonged in a community of faith. Finally he joined a casual Bible study that meets at a coffee shop once a month. Today, that monthly meeting is his only connection with Christians—but he considers it his "church" for now.

Bob's story is certainly not unique.

All across the United States today, believers who once attended church regularly are in the dropout category. Some quit because they were wounded by leaders or disappointed by pastoral failure. Others became bored with irrelevant church programs or petty squabbles. Others simply felt relationally disconnected, even though they sat beside the same people week after week.

In an increasingly secular culture, pastors are facing the reality that the social pressures of respectability or family influence that may have once filled church pews no longer hold sway. Additionally, committed believers are asking whether their Sunday morning ritual of sitting in a pew, singing songs

and listening to a sermon is what it means to obey the Scriptures' command to *be* the church.

From graphic sermons about sex and contests to win a Hummer to cafés and skate parks, marketing techniques and programs are the methods some churches have resorted to as the way to counteract this trend, targeting the unchurched or de-churched in an attempt to regain their participation. But could this effort actually intensify the problem?

The seeker-sensitive and church-growth movements of the 1970s through the 1990s made churches aware of nonessential layers of tradition that turn off outsiders, and they helped pastors become savvy in how they communicate the gospel to seekers. But an unintended consequence was that church became not an essential means of discipleship and accountability for the family of God, but an optional consumer product that could be shaped to appeal to specific audiences.

And for many—particularly the young—this option is just as easily ignored. A 2007 study by LifeWay Research revealed that 70 percent of young adults ages 23 to 30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18 and 22.

Their reasons for leaving ranged from wanting to "take a break from church" (27 percent) and going to college (25 percent) to "religious, ethical or political beliefs" and—perhaps most telling—"I was only going to church to please others" (17 percent). Among the reasons there is no mention that these young people left because the programs weren't meeting their needs or the message wasn't being communicated in a relevant way. If this were the problem, it could easily be solved with some simple programmatic shifts in the way we do church.

In fact, the situation is much more serious. As LifeWay President Ed Stetzer laments in his analysis of the study, "Parents and churches are not passing on a robust Christian faith and an accompanying commitment to the church." In other

words, declining church attendance is a symptom of a deeper problem: Many churches are not venues of active and effective discipleship. And this epidemic has driven some church leaders to abandon the system altogether.

‘Detoxing’ From Church

James Bradshaw served as an ordained United Methodist minister for 22 years until June 30, 2009, when he voluntarily surrendered his credentials and resigned his position as pastor of First United Methodist Church in Sanford, Florida. No, this was not another pastoral scandal. Bradshaw felt called to leave the church to pursue a more “authentic understanding of the kingdom of God.”

“The organized church today has been infiltrated over the centuries by religious things that have watered down the gospel,” he explains. “It started in A.D. 300 with Constantine. The church sold its birthright when the apostles and prophets said to the king, ‘You govern, and we’ll do the spiritual stuff.’”

Since his departure, Bradshaw says he’s been “detoxing” from organized church and has connected with an apostolic network in Atlanta that shares his views. Although he admits to being tempted to start a nondenominational church, he notes, “It would have been the same thing all over again—the house of Saul.”

Instead, he envisions himself tent making in the secular workplace so that he can pursue relational discipleship among a smaller group of people in hopes of raising up “spiritual sons”—sons he believes are much less likely to be dropouts from the body of Christ.

For Frank Viola, stories like Bradshaw’s are an indication that a “second reformation” is already happening. The co-author with George Barna of *Pagan Christianity,* Viola has long been a controversialist in evangelical circles and a popular

speaker in the house-church movement. Although he admits that some are leaving the church because of a shallow or nominal commitment to Christ, Viola argues that many more are doing so for all the right reasons.

“Of the 1 million adults who leave the traditional church every year in the United States, a large number of them are joining simpler forms of church, such as house churches and organic churches,” he notes. “God is moving once again, and He’s bringing His people back to His original intention for church life.”

The numbers on these “simpler forms” are notoriously fuzzy. A 2009 Barna Group study attempted to pin down the movement’s size with specific questions on house-church involvement and discovered that 3 percent to 6 percent of adults claim to be involved in home-based fellowships “not associated in any way with a local, congregational type of church.”

These would be considered the classic house churches that gather in homes, coffee shops and pubs, have a minimalistic view of leadership and structure and—sometimes—a negative attitude toward the institutional church. But, in addition to the “not associated” there are an increasing number of simple church groups that are affiliated in some way with traditional congregations—even if their members never walk through the doors.

Dan Lacich is pastor of distributed sites for Northland, a Church Distributed, a megachurch with multiple sites in the Orlando, Florida, area. Northland Senior Pastor Joel Hunter said he felt called in 2008 to plant 1 million churches, which led to the congregation of 12,000 partnering with the house-church movement to accomplish this goal.

“We knew these 1 million churches would not be traditional churches,” Lacich explains. “It would have to be a first-century model in which people self-organize the church.”

To that end, Northland created high-tech resources for home fellowships and partnered with Global Media Outreach, an online evangelism tool affiliated with Campus Crusade for Christ, to disciple people who come to faith through the church's Web ministry.

"Our goal is to figure out how we can help someone be the church, even if they never walk through the doors of a traditional church," Lacich says, describing a new interactive Web platform that the church is creating.

"We hope they never find out who we are, and the Web site we're putting together to make this happen has no connection with us."

Although Northland has an extensive community of online worshipers, Lacich stresses that the church's intention is not to accomplish its vision of 1 million churches by simply replicating miniature franchises of the megachurch. And the church will not collect offerings or dues from the house gatherings that use its resources or stream its services.

Lacich admits the open-handed approach comes with its own problems.

"What if someone does something wrong in one of these churches?" he asks. "The incorrect assumption is that we have it under control and don't have troubles in a large church.

"There will always be the chance that someone will do something that's heretical. Just like the first-century church, we have to trust that the Holy Spirit is in this thing."

Any conversation about house churches naturally gravitates toward the issues of heresy, but from a historical perspective, the assumption that smaller churches are more vulnerable to heresy is problematic.

When one observes the theological corruption that led to the Protestant Reformation or the current schisms in denominations over the ordination of practicing homosexuals, it could be argued that large, top-heavy church institutions are worse breeding grounds for false doctrine than small groups of believers seeking accountability and spiritual growth together.

“I get asked about heresy more than almost anything else when I am teaching about organic church,” says Neil Cole, a church planter and author of *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church*. “But the best solution to heresy in the church is not to have better-trained leaders in the pulpits but better-trained people in the pews.”

Cole left his role on staff at a megachurch in the Grace Brethren Church in 1998 and launched Church Multiplication Associates (CMA). The organization has trained nearly 22,000 church planters from all denominations to start churches as small as two or three people that are called Life Transformation Groups.

Although Cole argues that because of human weakness no church will ever be able to completely avoid heresy, he says intensive discipleship models such as CMA’s create settings in which new believers learn Bible study methods that will help them discern truth from error.

“Perhaps we have misread what is the real threat of false doctrine that infiltrates the church in the West,” he notes. “Sometimes we can espouse the right words and live by the wrong ideas. Having correct statements of faith in your creed is not all there is to being orthodox.”

Cole’s statement touches on the root issue of “church dropouts.” At its core the trend of church dropouts is only a crisis if those “dropping out” are moving away from authentic biblical Christianity—which may be cultivated outside the

institutional church but not outside the body of Christ in its many local expressions.

Of greater concern are those who don't drop out but remain in the pews as passive consumers of a religious product that never transforms their lives, convinced that the Sunday ritual somehow earns them favor with God and satisfies His radical call to discipleship.

The Historic View

No one is sure where the "simple church" model will take us. But at a time when moral absolutes are being reconfigured in our culture, it would be beneficial to consult with early church fathers on this subject.

The third-century bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, is known for his declaration, "Outside the church there is no salvation." Whether he was referring to those who left the church or those who had never been a part of it, he compared their plight to that of the poor souls who didn't make it on the ark before the flood.

This may sound like a blunt and condemning statement in the ears of a postmodern Christian who attends church if, where and when he or she chooses, and who believes one's relationship with God is an entirely personal matter. The problem is, Cyprian had the Bible on his side.

The New Testament does not envision the possibility of authentic spiritual life outside the body of Christ. Whether it's in the "I am the vine" passages of John 15 or the exhortation to not "forsake the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25, NKJV), Scripture is clear in its teaching that Christian faith is meant to be lived out in community.

In addition to the positive instructions to participate as an

active member of the body of Christ, Jesus' words on church discipline reveal the serious side of life outside the church. Although it may not carry much weight today, for early Christians, the threat of excommunication was a dire warning that put their very souls in danger.

Jesus says this much when He lays out the earthly—and eternal—consequences for the unrepentant sinner who is put out of fellowship: "'And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' " (Matt. 18:17-18).

Later, Paul fleshes out Jesus' principles on church discipline when he instructs the church at Corinth to expel the immoral member in their midst. Paul notes that by doing this the church is turning the unrepentant sinner over to Satan so that, though he may be physically destroyed, his soul might be saved (see 1 Cor. 5:5).

Like Cyprian, Jesus, Paul and the writer of Hebrews are not suggesting that salvation comes through participation in church activities. They are saying that fellowship with the body of Christ reveals and strengthens the union believers already have with Christ Himself—the two are inseparable.

In this season of uncertainty about what a genuine church looks like, it is essential that we hold on to the historic, biblical concept of the family of God and our membership in it. Although it is crucial for us to reject old, tired models of church that don't inspire vibrant faith, we must be careful that we aren't attempting to tear down what God intends to build.

After all, it was Jesus who said in Matthew 16:18: "'On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not

prevail against it.’ ” In the end, regardless of the opinions of men, the church will stand.

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