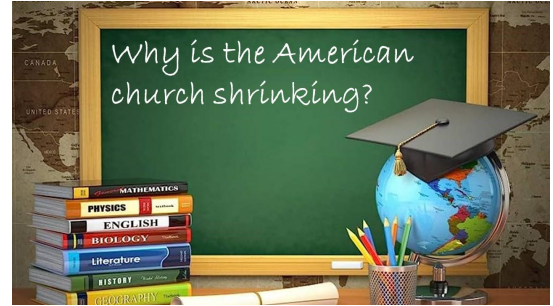


## It's Up to You 2023 (Week 5): Why is the American Church Shrinking?

### **Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less**



1. That affiliation with Christianity and church is in sharp decline is now a foregone conclusion, but here are some numbers to flesh that out: by 2050, 40% of existing churches will close, and by roughly the same juncture, America will no longer be a majority Christian country.
2. A way of answering today's question that both helps us diagnose the problem and have hope is to ask why Christianity is exploding in the global South (Asia, Africa, and Latin America): in 1920, 82% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America, whereas almost 70% today live in the global South.
3. First, Christianity in the global South is about encounter, experience, and expectation, not merely believing or doing.
4. Christians in the global South operate from two fundamental theological realities: a) God is everywhere, and the material and spiritual worlds overlap entirely (i.e., Psalm 8.1), and b) that God who is everywhere acts on our behalf, seeking justice and goodness for all (i.e., Zech. 7.9-10).
5. Second, Christians in the global South consider community and relationships indivisible from and indispensable to the Christian faith, whereas in the West religion tends to be very individualistic.
6. While 65% of Americans claim to be Christian, only between 25%-33% of the population are actively engaged in church, meaning that there are more disconnected, "solo" Christians in the country than there are connected ones.
7. Third, Christians in the global South tend to unite in ministry partnerships, forgoing the usual doctrinal divides that separate American Christians.
8. Fourth and last, Christians in the global South know from experience that, like the very first Christians, it is possible to thrive as minority under duress.
9. At the very least, this is a moment for the American church to be humble, realizing that we are not the center of the Christian universe and that we have lots to learn from those who thought needed to learn from us.
10. That humility will likely include a) grieving that we've gone about Christianity in such a way that many now want to dissociate from it, and b) admitting that there are parts of how we've gone about church that need to die in order for God to breathe new life into us.

## Quotes to Ponder

Tom Lin, in Religious News Service, 2021: “Often, Christians from the majority world have both a deep sense of God’s supernatural presence in the world and an active expectation that God not only can, but will, intervene in response to our needs and petitions. There is an expectant, persistent posture of hope for God to break through.”

William Dyrness (Fuller Seminary): “In Western Christianity...the primary locus of religion is the individual. For most people outside of the West, community and relationship are preexistent, involuntary, and constitutive. This means actual relationships take precedent over all else.”

Y Bonesteele (Lifeway Research, 2021): “In countries where Christians are not the majority...the primary issues of the gospel are essential, but the secondary and tertiary issues of the faith are not. Christian workers learn to work together for the sake of the gospel and the Kingdom beyond their personal preferences.”

Pastor Vance Johnson, writing about church partnerships: It’s not about growing ‘your’ church (which can easily become about growing ‘your’ empire). It’s about expanding ‘His’ kingdom... God’s intent is more about reaching the people of your community than growing your particular church.

Vincent Lloyd (Villanova University): “...(Historically), Christians in Europe and North America have been misled by the privilege and comfort that comes with occupying a position of power. In the minority and under duress, Christians will find it easier to access the truth of the faith, namely a commitment to new life and to a new world.”

## A Prayer for the Week

A Paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer (from Liturgies from Below):

Our God and holy Elder, who colors the earth and sky, be blessed because of all You give us.

May justice come to Your sons and daughters, and may we find fullness by offering all a good and dignified life.

May Your many resources be shared with equity so that there is no lack of bread on any table.

Forgive us for consuming so much and giving so little, but most of all, convince us how much we need Your forgiveness so that we will forgive others just as much.

Lead us not into the temptations of greed, pride, and power, for the strength of their evil far exceeds our ability to resist them.

We ask these things because You alone possess the memory of the Creator, You alone know the depth of our world’s struggle, and You alone are the hope of any good future, amen.

## Explore More This Week

Interested in the biblical warnings about how a church can lose its spiritual witness and effectiveness? Try reading Revelation 2-3 this week, and pray special attention to how most of the churches mentioned might lose their witness, if they're not careful or do no change: [Rev 2-3 NRSVUE](#)

Interested in learning about the American church's reputational problem? Try this article - [Openness to Jesus Isn't the Problem—the Church Is](#)

A 40 min. podcast on the great "dechurching" of America, drawing on research that will be published in October 2023 in book form: [Michael Graham and Jim Davis: What 'The Great Dechurching' Means for Church Leaders](#)

A good article on why people are leaving church - points 1-2 tie directly to lessons we can glean from the church of the global South: [New Exodus? 4 Reasons Why People Are Leaving the Church \(Including Christians\)](#)

A few good articles on the church of the global South: [The Embodied Joy of the Global Church](#) and [Wesley Granberg-Michaelson: What global Christianity means for the church in America](#) and [How the Growing Global Church Can Encourage American Christians](#)