How To Leave A Church

One of the most excruciating decisions you will make as a Christian is to leave your home church. By this, we mean leaving a church you have been part of for a number of years. There are many different reasons for leaving: job relocation, God is calling you out to a different church or ministry, disagreement with leadership, differing vision, unresolved conflict, change of doctrine, lack of pastoral ministry, personal needs not being met, few people at the same stage of life, etc. Some of these are valid concerns, while others may be symptomatic of underlying issues. Whatever the reason, considering a change in your church family is not an easy task or one to be undertaken lightly.

How can you know for sure that leaving is the right thing to do? If it is, how can you leave in a God-honoring way? Here are some thoughts that may help you think through your options.

Eight Things To Consider

1. Your church is your spiritual family. It is not an organization like a social club or a corporation. Your actions will have a significant impact on you and the church.

2. Can you clearly state your reasons for thinking about leaving? Have you asked yourself, "Are these reasons enough to break fellowship with my church family, the people I have shared so much with over the years?"

3. Have you sought the advice of godly counselors, those mature in their faith walk? Their gentle input will be invaluable in helping you think through your concerns and the pros and cons of leaving. They need not be part of the church you attend, but be sure they are godly individuals.

4. Are you leaving because of unresolved conflict with someone? Matt 18:15 says that a Christian is to "go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." If conflicts are left unresolved, you run the danger of repeating the problem in any new church that you join. Conflicts, though, can be a great tool for helping us mature in the Lord, provided we don't run away from them. They help us develop grace and mercy. So before picking up root, wouldn't it be better to seek resolution rather than avoidance? If you need help in doing this, seek wise, godly counsel.

5. If your reason for leaving has to do with what you see as inadequate ministry or doctrine, your best bet is to talk with the elders or leadership of your church. You may have some valuable feedback they need to hear. Plus, it is not good to leave without giving them a chance to respond to your concerns. If it is God's time for you to move on, then ask yourself, a) have you found or trained others as your replacement in ministries you have been involved in and b) have you made it clear there is no desire to draw away others with you?

6. Is it a matter of "worship style?" For some, the music makes the difference. In one sense, the singing can be an indicator of the joy in the life of the church. This is a subjective thing so it must be considered carefully. A church can have professional quality Sunday morning presentation, but be lacking significantly in spiritual depth. On the other hand, if not much effort is put into the music ministry, this could be an indicator of lazy leadership or restrictive spiritual life.

7. Has "church hopping" become your style, in that you have been part of numerous churches and find problems with every one? That is not healthy. To be sure every church is imperfect, for they are all made up of imperfect people. Leaders are flawed as well. The Body of Christ is made up of sinners saved by grace that continue to have the odor of sin as well as the fragrance of God's grace. It will be that way until the Lord returns. Could it be that the Lord wants to develop in you the character of grace and forgiveness towards others' imperfectness or sin? It would be a good idea to discuss this with your current leadership before leaving for another church.

8. Have you earnestly prayed about your decision? Honestly, God knows your heart and wants to help you make a wise decision. The impact of this decision is significant for you and your family, as well as for the church you are leaving and the one you will join.

What Now?

OK, what if after all this you feel you still need to leave? First, meet with one or more of the elders to discuss your con-

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cerns. Be open to their response, listening for their burdens and thinking. Remember, this is a two-way communication. There may be misunderstanding or disagreement—but there needs to be clarity.

If personal interaction with an elder or elders does not bring resolution, then write a letter (not an e-mail which can seem too impersonal) to the elders of the church and include the following:

1. Acknowledgement what God has done in your life through your fellowship at the church (it is always good to begin with "good news" before you convey the "bad news"). Don't forget to thank the leaders for the role they have played in your spiritual formation. Even if you are leaving with some significant concerns, surely God has used the church in your life for some blessings, hasn't He?

2. Explain what you have done about your concerns (talked with the elders/ leaders, tried to make changes, etc.).

3. If you have negative reasons for leaving describe those concerns clearly and succinctly, not too much detail—just enough so they know why you feel leaving is the best option for you. Don't lay blame, simply state your case. You don't want to burn any bridges, but to lay the foundation for continued fellowship and friendship with them after you leave. You may want to return some day!

4. Share with the elders/leaders what your plans are for the next stage of your spiritual journey. They will be concerned that you do not drift spiritually, but find a good church where you can grow.

5. Do all you can to minimize the impact of your leaving. This would include providing time for replacements for any ministry you have been involved in.

6. Commit yourself to not tearing down the church you are leaving by gossiping or spreading discontent. Remember, Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it, so be careful about what you say about your fellow believers who make up His Body. In all your conversations with other members of the church, let your words be seasoned with grace. Assure the leadership that your intention is to leave quietly and with as little adverse impact on the church as possible.

7. If a public statement is advised, suggest that the elders work with you on a carefully worded statement that conveys the matter to the rest of the church. This will ensure that everyone is hearing the same thing. Show your respect to the elders in the way you leave—keep silent if that is what they want, write a letter to the church or make a public statement. Whatever you do, do it in consultation with the leadership, as much as possible. Do not give Satan a foothold or opportunity for disunity.

8. If the elders or leadership of your church are unresponsive to your overtures or react in a fleshly way, you should rather take the high road of grace. There may be many factors involved in their reaction so it is not safe to guess. Therefore, grace along with meekness is the better response. Commit to pray genuinely for the church, its leadership and its people.

How Do You Choose Another Church?

Choosing a new church is not as easy as it might seem. See the companion leaflet entitled, "How to Choose A Church."

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