

How To Leave a Church

Everyone will leave their church at some point. Whether through death, a move, or purposeful decision, *Leaving a local congregation should be one of the most difficult decisions we face.* It should be filled with the recollection of our love for the saints, their love for us, our service together in the name of our Lord, and our sorrows and joys in the faith. A church is family and we ought never feel it easy to leave family—even an unhealthy family. But we do sometimes find ourselves at that crossroads. When we've decided to leave, there are at least five things we want to do before we go.

1. Share Your Thinking/Reasons with the Leaders

You've no doubt been thinking of leaving for some time. In all likelihood you did not wake up with the sudden new thought, *"I think I'm going to find another church."* The thought has been building for some time. You've been piling up observations, minor disappointments, major hurts and persistent longings. You've likely done that quietly, without talking to anyone. And you've likely kept your silence for good reasons.

First, you thought perhaps the situation would change. If you kept quiet things would get better and you wouldn't have caused a "stir" by saying anything.

Then you kept quiet because you didn't want to spread your concern to others or hurt anyone's feelings.

Finally, you kept quiet because you stopped believing any change was possible or forthcoming. Now, after all those silent months of stockpiling critiques, you've decided to leave.

But if you leave this way, you're going to leave a ghost in the congregation. People will be haunted by your absence and wonder, What happened to them? Why did they leave? Then people feel abandoned and hurt.

There's a better way to leave. ***Share your thinking with your leaders*** before you make the final decision. Let them shepherd you through your thoughts and reasons even if that means shepherding you to the next church. Two things will happen.

1) You will benefit from their spiritual care (and perhaps even be surprised by their agreement or receptivity).

And **2)** the church's leader and congregation will benefit from your insight. There's a way

to leave a church that amounts to win-win rather than abandonment.

2. Resolve Any Outstanding Conflicts

I suspect I experience what a lot of pastors experience: persons coming to the church disgruntled with persons in their previous church without having done anything to resolve the conflict. They're running from something rather than facing it. The something could be personal conflict, church discipline or theological strife. *In either case, don't leave your church before you've addressed the conflict.* Obey our Lord's instructions in Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:15. Go and be reconciled to the best of your ability.

If you obey the Lord in this before moving on then everybody wins. Lord willing, you win your brother over and the relationship is mended. You may find you don't have to leave at all and experience renewed joy in the church family you've already invested years of life with. Even if you still need or want to leave, you'll experience freedom from guilt because you've *"made every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Eph. 4:3).

And your new church family will be able to receive you without the baggage associated with the previous church.

At FBC (and CLC) we refuse to take into membership anyone we know has some outstanding issue with their previous church. We insist they return to work things out before coming to us, and we very often follow-up with leaders of the church to confirm that appropriate efforts have been made. We find this leads to peace between churches, grace in reconciliation, and freshness in any new starts that are made.

3. Express Your Appreciation for the Church's Ministry in Your Life

When people leave suddenly and without conversation with the leaders of the church they very often fall prey to ingratitude. Having convinced themselves of all the problems in the church, they usually minimize the strengths and virtues of the church. Sadly, this is the way many of us work ourselves up to making major decisions—emphasize the negative and downplay the positives.

But truthfully, no true church is without significant positive qualities. Even the church at Corinth, with all their problems, could be commended for the *"grace given you in Christ Jesus"* (1:4), for having been *"enriched in every way"* (1:5), *"not lack[ing] any spiritual gift as they eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed"* (1:7), and being *"the seal of*

[Paul's] apostleship in the Lord" (9:2). They had significant problems, but also much to commend. Though Paul heard things that he as an apostle should put in order, he nevertheless confirmed their testimony in Christ (1:6) and gave praise wherever appropriate.

We should celebrate God's grace in a church long before we decide and actually leave. We should note the positive ways the church has impacted and blessed us spiritually. We should communicate that to our leaders and, where appropriate, to the body as a whole.

I love those resignation letters that actually strengthen and edify the body because the brother/sister resigning "builds an Ebenezer" to God's grace as they leave.

Please don't make this a matter of soothing your conscience once you've decided to leave in an unhealthy way. Make this a matter of constant discipline in grace. Communicate appreciation before you decide to leave, as you're thinking about leaving, and once you do leave. Our churches would be far healthier and more joyful if they were communities of gracious affirmation and appreciation.

4. Say "Goodbye" to Friends and Family

Unless we've been unusually isolated in our church families, chances are we have some significant family and friends who will remain in the church. They mean a great deal to us and they're likely to be affected by our leaving. These are people you want to say your "goodbyes" to in person.

You don't want them to hear you're leaving or have left on the floor of a members' meeting.

You don't want to inadvertently suggest their friendship doesn't or hasn't meant much to you. You don't want them wondering whether you actually loved them. You don't want things to be awkward when you see them out and about in the community.

Instead, you want them to be affirmed in and by your love. You want them to know you will carry them in your affections though you're going to settle into a new communion. You want them to know, circumstances permitting, that the friendship will continue and you'll always be brothers and sisters in Christ.

So, include some personal time with friends and family before you actually leave the church. Invite them to your home or to coffee. Share with them your appreciation and your hopes as you move forward. Most will understand and be happy for you, even if

they're sad for themselves and their church. Such mourning and rejoicing are part of what it means to be the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27).

5. Be Honest with Yourself about Your Own Efforts, Motives and Failings

Leaving a church ought to be cause for self-examination. We ought to get the log out of our own eyes before focusing on the speck in the church's eye (Matt. 7:3-4). This is hard, slow work—and most people skip it. It's so easy to assume the purity of our own motives, to view ourselves as victims or martyrs, and to trivialize our many failings.

But integrity requires we be honest with the man in the mirror. Why are we thinking of leaving? What really motivates our assessment and desires? How have we contributed to the problems and feelings we're finding so dissatisfying or hurtful? Have we taken full responsibility in confession, repentance and action?

We're not honestly ready to leave and our churches are not ready for us to leave until we've gotten before the Lord with transparency, humility and ruthlessness with our own sin and flesh. But, if we muster such honesty, it will lead to our increased sanctification and joy.

CONCLUSION

Leaving a church can be a means of grace rather than a source of pain for everyone involved. But for grace to be multiplied we'll have to do some things before we decide to leave and actually exit. Receiving this grace will require putting to death the fear of man and believing that God exists and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him (Heb. 11:6). If you are thinking of leaving, think of how you will leave. It could make a positive difference for you, your friends, your current and your future churches.