

Counseling People Who Desire to Leave Their Local Church

Introduction:

One of the most important, and yet so often neglected, aspects of biblical counseling is the matter of counseling a person(s) whether to leave their local church. It is an important issue to deal with because it is a very common practice in North American Christianity, and yet it is often neglected because of its potential for relational volatility. Further, it is often neglected today because we live in an individualistic, “what’s in it for me” consumer mentality, which motivates people to “shop around” for the church that best meets “our present needs”. It is also difficult for pastors of evangelical, local churches because they don’t want to be accused of “sheep stealing” when someone from another congregation in the city visits their church. They are also otherwise leery of being accused of manipulating people to stay a part of their congregation, especially when some of their members visit around in search of the “latest and greatest” philosophy of ministry.

So what is a church member to do in the matter of leaving a particular local church in favor of another? And what are you to do if you’re the pastor of the church they’re deciding to leave? How would you counsel them? What if you’re the pastor of one church in your city in which someone has come to after having left another? What would your counsel be to these? What are the biblical reasons for leaving a local church anyway? Can professing Christians simply say that it is their preference to leave one church for another? Is it simply a matter of preference anyway? Further, what are the biblical guidelines for Christians separating themselves from other Christians in a local church setting? What responsibility does a Christian have to their present spiritual leadership, as well as the flock to whom they have committed themselves? Can they (or should they?) simply walk away from one flock of God to another? None of these issues are easy. This seminar will attempt to answer these questions so that true, biblical counsel can be given to listening sheep who want to discern the right answers in the matter of genuine fellowship with God’s people.

I. Why Do Some People Leave Local Churches? A Preliminary Assessment

A. Legitimate Reasons for Leaving a Local Church

1) Biblical/Doctrinal disagreement or defection

- Romans 16:17-18

- 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15
- 1 Timothy 1:3-7
- 1 Timothy 4:7a
- 1 Timothy 6:3-5
- 2 Timothy 2:14-17, 23
- 2 Timothy 3:13-14
- 2 Timothy 4:14-15
- Titus 1:9, 13-14
- Titus 3:9
- 1 John 3:7
- 2 John 8-11

2) **Doctrinally questionable or immoral church leadership**

What about leaving a local church over **doctrinal issues or the church leadership is unwilling to deal with either their morality or others within the congregation?** Yes, there may in fact be times where this is appropriate. The Pastoral Epistles speak to these things (1 Timothy 5:19-22 is an example). The fact is however, most people will probably agree that heresy and unaddressed moral failures are good reasons for departing a local church. Most will probably also agree that one shouldn't leave to escape unreconciled relationships. Again, the key is to diligently pursue unity (i.e., Ephesians 4:1-3). If unity can be achieved between both the congregation and the leadership, with God's character and standards being seen and applied, then true unity can exist. When these things are compromised, true unity will not be achieved.

- 1 Timothy 5:19-22
- Titus 3:9-11
- 2 John 8-11
- Ephesians 5: 11

3) **The Providence of God in moving someone away from their local church**

What about leaving a local church for reasons of providence? What might that look like? Your company transfers you to another city and you find that a Bible-teaching church with a Biblically precise philosophy of ministry is located there. Or maybe you are invited to participate in the planting of a new church there, and you can help with the ground-floor set-up of that ministry. There are possibly many reasons like these, which might be right reasons to consider moving from your present church ministry and involvement.

- James 4:13-17
- Acts 17:28
- Jeremiah 10:23
- Proverbs 20:24

- Proverbs 16:9
- Matthew 6:26-33

How can all of this be brought to a very practical level? Can we say that **all** issues related to leaving the church are either only doctrinal/moral or preferential? Are there other reasons, as some would say for, "spiritual needs/ministry needs?" A few examples might help. Say, for instance, someone chooses to leave a Bible-believing church because the children's Sunday school literature is published by one evangelical publisher rather than another, or because we preach from The New American Standard Bible rather than the King James Version exclusively. It is not necessarily a willful, sinful choice to leave, if we assume of course, that this person is not angry with the Children's Pastor and/or others for using this curriculum, or for using a different Bible translation. However, it certainly is an immature choice. Perhaps in this instance, the better choice would be to become involved with the Children's Sunday school ministry to work with others in order to strengthen that ministry and find out why a certain curriculum was chosen. One might also study the issues related to Bible translations and ask questions rather than simply going to another church whose preferences fit their own.

If a person leaves a local church for reasons other than, **(1) *the church itself becomes doctrinally defective; (2) there is unrepentant sin within the spiritual leadership; (3) the providence of God***, then they leave for reasons other than what the Bible speaks to. Can someone leave for reasons other than what the Bible speaks to? The answer should be: If the Bible doesn't give me an explicit answer to a particular question, are there any implicit principles from which I can draw out of Scripture? If 2 Peter 1:3-4 tells me that the Scripture is sufficient for my every need, then what principles can I glean from God's Word which will help me here? At that point, I will need the help of others, most notably, the spiritual leadership over me. If the elders deem that I am making a wise and judicious decision to leave that local church-based upon any explicit or implicit truths gleaned from God's Word, then this should really be classified under the banner of God's providential direction. At that point, I can therefore leave with the confidence of having searched the Scripture, having sought the proper consultation by the elders, and can be given the affirmation and blessing of leaving by my peers.

B. Illegitimate Reasons for Leaving a Local Church

- 4) Some who are in local churches are not true Christians and therefore make their decisions based on the flesh**
 - Romans 8:7-8
 - 1 Corinthians 2:14-15
 - Galatians 5:16
- 5) The demands of discipleship often forces the issue of a lack of commitment to Christ**

- John 6:60-67
- Matthew 10:34-39
- Matthew 16:24-26
- Luke 9:57-62

6) The love of self and the desire for worldly things choke out a desire for the Word of God

- Matthew 13:7, 22
- Luke 18:18-25
- Matthew 6:19-24
- James 3:1-6
- James 4:4
- 1 John 2:15-17
- 2 Corinthians 10:3
- Galatians 3:1- 3
- Galatians 4:9

7) Tares among the wheat will always be a reality in the church

- Matthew 13:24-30, 38-42
- 2 Corinthians 13:5
- James 1:21-22
- Titus 1:15-16

8) Some are dull of hearing of the Word, are sluggish with regard to spiritual matters, and lack genuine diligence

- Hebrews 5:11-14
- Hebrews 6:11-12
- Hebrews 10:35-39
- 2 Peter 1:5-11
- 2Peter 3:14

9) Some in leaving a church, exhibit pride, arrogance, and/or boasting

- Romans 12:16
- 1 Corinthians 4:6, 18-19
- 1 Corinthians 5:6
- 1 Corinthians 10:12
- James 3:14
- James 4:13-17
- 1 Peter 5:5-6

10) Some leave because of secret sins like sexual immorality

- 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 9-13
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-20
- 1 Corinthians 10:8
- 2 Corinthians 12:21
- Ephesians 5:3-5
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7
- Hebrews 12:15-17
- 1 Peter 1:14-15
- 1 Peter 2:11

11) Some leave simply because of spiritual immaturity

- 1 Corinthians 2:5-8
- 1 Corinthians 3:1-2
- 1 Corinthians 14:20
- Hebrews 6:1-3

12) Some have developed an habitual forsaking of worship because of their sin and sloth

- Hebrews 2:1
- Hebrews 6:4-8
- Hebrews 10:25-26

13) Some leave because of unbelief

- Romans 11:23
- Hebrews 3:12-13,19
- Hebrews 4:1-2
- James 1:6-8

14) Some leave because of general disobedience

- 2 Corinthians 6:1
- Hebrews 4:6, 11
- Hebrews 12:25

15) Some desire to follow ear-tickling, imprecise, or otherwise aberrant teaching in accordance with their own unskilled definition of what it means to proclaim God's Word

- 2 Corinthians 2:17
- 2 Corinthians 4:2, 5
- 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

- Galatians 1:6-9
- Philippians 3:17-19
- 1 Thessalonians 2:3, 5-6
- 2 Timothy 4:3-4
- 1 Peter 5:2-3
- 2 Peter 2:1-3
- 2 Peter 3:16-17
- 2 John 7
- 3 John 9-10
- Jude 4, 10-13

16) Some either leave or desire to stay because they are involved in factiousness/strife/division/dissensions/quarrels/grumbling/disputing

- Romans 16:17
- 1 Corinthians 1:10-11
- 1 Corinthians 3:3
- 1 Corinthians 11:18-19
- Galatians 5:15, 20
- Philippians 2:14
- Philippians 4:2-3
- 2 Thessalonians 3:11b
- Titus 3:10-11
- James 4:1
- James 5:9

17) Some are involved in the unbiblical practice of following men and their programs/philosophy of ministry rather than following God Himself through His appointed leaders

- 1 Corinthians 1:12-17
- 1 Corinthians 3:4-7

18) Some leave because of their apostasy from the faith

- 1 Timothy 3:1-9
- 1 Timothy 4:1
- 1 Timothy 6:20-21
- 2 Timothy 2:19
- 2 Timothy 4:16
- 1 John 2:19, 22-23

19) Some leave to avoid accountability or even church discipline

- Matthew 18:15-18

- Proverbs 27:17
- 1 Peter 4:17
- John 2:19
- John 3:10b

20) Some leave because they want to flaunt their liberty in Christ, claim that the church is legalistic, or otherwise desire to live in antinomianism

- Romans 6:1
- Galatians 5:13
- 1 Peter 2:16, 19
- 1 John 2:4-5
- Jude 4

21) Some refuse to defer to or prefer one another's interests above their own

- Romans 14:10, 19
- Romans 15:2, 7
- Galatians 6:2
- Philippians 2:1-5
- Colossians 3:12-15
- 1 Thessalonians 5: 11, 15
- 1 Peter 3:8-9

22) Some are flirting with or are directly involved in partnerships with unbelievers

- 1 Corinthians 5:6
- 2 Corinthians 6:14-16

23) Some employ unjust, unfair, and unbiblical evaluations of spiritual leadership

- 2 Corinthians 10:10
- 2 Corinthians 11:6

24) Some disdain God's Truth and His truth-tellers

- Amos 5:10
- 2 Corinthians 12:15
- 15 Galatians 4:16

25) Some refuse to either seek or grant forgiveness or both

- Matthew 6:14-15
- Matthew 18:21-35
- Colossians 3:13
- Ephesians 4:2-3

II What About the Exercising of One's Preferences in Choosing to Leave a Local Church?

A. Initial Statements

Often, people will claim that leaving a local church for another is simply a matter of preference. What are we to think about these so-called preferences? In a related issue, if someone were to claim that they are actually leaving for doctrinal reasons, but are in fact only reasons of preference, how do we counsel them accordingly? And further, what if they *are* leaving for doctrinal reasons, but those doctrinal reasons turn out to be only of a secondary nature? ***The attached appendices could be used as a guide in determining what biblical issues are indeed primary, secondary, or even tertiary.*** (Phil – I can show you these.)

Regardless of the reasons people often use in leaving a local church, it is a perplexing and difficult issue. After having talked to many people who have left one local church for another, they themselves often do not understand the proper reasons for leaving and sometimes they have been unable to articulate exactly why they have left. Nevertheless, anyone who is contemplating leaving their church for another should heed the wise words contained in the May 31st, 2000 entry of *Tabletalk*, the devotional magazine of R.C. Sproul's ministry, *Ligionier*:

"We must never jump to conclusions and take our leave of a church in a willy-nilly way, for joining and leaving churches are very serious matters. Most churches receive their members with sacred vows; if you joined your church this way, you should resolve to keep your vows even through difficult times. However, if the church of which you are a member seems to be on the edges of apostasy and you are not being nurtured spiritually, you may leave. And if the church has clearly crossed into apostasy, you must leave. But be very careful, and let the Bible and the marks of the church [(1) The faithful preaching of the gospel; (2) The proper administration of the ordinances; and (3) The right practice of church discipline) guide your decision" (Tabletalk, May, 2000, p. 48).

This is such sound and wise advice. It should be readily admitted that the Bible does not address every reason that someone could give for leaving one local church for another. But the Bible most certainly addresses the issue of preferences in general, regardless of what they may be and for whatever purpose they may be employed. This would by necessity include someone's preferences in deciding to leave a church.

B. Biblical Considerations

The question must be asked, "Is there liberty in Scripture for someone to leave a local church when they use the concept of personal preferences?" The answer to that question is to go to those passages that speak of preferences and find out. And **what you find there is a reverse of what people think. In cases of preference, whatever that preference may be, it is not their liberty to do anything they want but they must defer their preferences to one another.** These passages enjoin people to give up their preferences for the sake of their fellow believers, not the opposite. No one can claim justification that their personal preferences are the deciding factor in separating from other Christians.

Many will say however, "Well, this is just your interpretation. I don't share that interpretation." But the answer to these questions can't simply be to dismiss the entire issue by the mere wave of the interpretive hand. The Bible teaches that we should lay aside our preferences for the sake of the greater body. For instance, if someone wanted a more contemporary worship style as over against a so-called more traditional one, they are to lay aside this preference, if indeed their own church has a more traditional form of public worship. Likewise, if someone prefers a more traditional style and his/her church sings more contemporary music, they must lay aside their preference. The same would be true of the teaching style of the pulpit, the structure of the youth ministry, audience applause in public worship, or else, even obvious, trivial reasons (the color of the carpet, the absence of hot water in the men's restroom, stadium seats rather than pews, the format of the bulletin, etc.).

Is someone automatically in sin though, simply because they decided to leave our church for any of these preferential reasons? No, they wouldn't be "in sin," but we would certainly encourage them to make a more mature decision in these matters. The fact is, there will always be issues of preference in any local church. Do I leave my local church every time I believe my preferences or the preferences of my family aren't being considered? No, that is precisely why the apostle Paul chooses to deal generically with the matter or preferences in the following texts.

- **Philippians 2:3-5**

Frankly, there are as many preferences as there are people, so how can we see resolve in this matter? By choosing to take my personal preferences and subjecting them to the will of those around me. That is how Paul can say, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:3-5). If you do this, Paul says we would make his "joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose" (v. 2). Whenever someone speaks of leaving a local church and states that it is for reasons of preference, Philippians 2:3-5 says they must actually give up their preferences rather than using them as a justification for their action.

- **Romans 14 & 15**

Paul becomes even more explicit in the chapters of Romans 14 & 15. Thankfully, we are not left with precious little Biblical information on the subject of the use of our preferences. We have all the Biblical data we need to allow our personal preferences to be subsumed under the preferences of the church as a whole. And then, when we are called upon to lovingly submit to the rule of the elders of our local church, all the members can lay aside their preferences for the sake of what is the overarching best for the congregation. When people leave a local church for reasons of preference, they fail to conform to the standard of Jesus Christ, of whom Paul says, regarding Christ's desire to give up His pleasures: "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good [my preferences being laid aside], to his edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me'" (Romans 15:1-3).

What do we Make of the Motives of Someone who Leaves a Local Church for Wrong Reasons of Exalting Their Preferences?

What do we make of the motives of those who choose to leave their local church for preferential reasons only? For one thing, we cannot omnisciently know their hearts-only God can. We cannot know in what condition their hearts may be. We are grieved to see anyone leave our church for preferential reasons, but must we see them as flagrantly transgressing the law of God in doing so and therefore in sin? No, of course not. Do we believe that everyone who chooses to leave has done so with bitterness and anger? Again, the emphatic answer is no. Do we believe that some have left local churches in this condition? Yes, and we would be naive to think otherwise when Scripture says that such things will occur in the life of the church. At the same time, one might choose to leave a church for preferences without harboring sinful motives or with a hard heart. Nevertheless, if they leave for the sake of fulfilling their own preferences, it is simply not a good and compelling reason to leave. But to state it once again, we have not and would not say they are leaving because of **willful sin**.

If a person leaves for preferences' sake, they show themselves to be leaving for reasons that can only be summed up by their present lack of maturity. Can they learn valuable lessons from making these mistakes? Absolutely, and many would confess they have learned a great deal by making such wrong decisions! The simple fact is this: all immaturity is not willful sin, but it is nonetheless a failure to conform to the ultimate standards of God's law. ***This is precisely why the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines sin in this way: "Sin is any lack of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (Question***

#15). Specifically described, sin is both any lack of perfect conformity to Christ-likeness as well as any particular transgression of God's revealed will (1 John 3:4).

People leaving churches for personal preferences are a phenomenon of the twentieth century, not a reasoned, studied approach from the Bible. When we come to the place where we rightly understand the Biblical issues more clearly, we should stand willing to come to proclaim the conviction that whatever God says, we will do, regardless of what people may say in our relativistic age. When someone says that simply because there are choices between several local churches in a particular area, they can pick and choose whichever they attend, as though it were a shopping spree, we should be greatly alarmed. And to suggest, as some have done, that "since we're all a part of the body of Christ, we should have the freedom to shop around willy-nilly, they grossly misunderstand the true nature of the church. All of the passages that speak of the "church" apply to any local expression of it. One simply cannot point to some nebulous view of the body of Christ that sees professing members shopping around local churches until their personal preferences are to their liking, changing churches *ad infinitum*, especially if their preferences become the major reason for their choice of a church. That smacks of the very things Paul was arguing against in Romans 14 & 15.

III. What is the Biblical Understanding in Separating Oneself from Other Christians?

A. Initial Statements

When you go to the passages that speak directly to the issue of separating oneself from others, it speaks of it as *eitherfleshly* (2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20), or *mandatory* (Titus 3 :9-11), depending on the situation. If it is a fleshly separation (Paul says he hopes he doesn't find in the Corinthians: *strife*, jealousy, angry tempers, *disputes*, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances, or as he says to the Galatians: idolatry, sorcery, *enmities*, *strife*, jealousy, outbursts of anger, *disputes*, *dissensions*, *factions*), no separation is allowed, but a bearing of one another's burdens (Galatians 6-which comes right out of this list given at the end of chapter 5). If it is mandatory, it will be because of heresy or those who teach it. Then you are *commanded* to depart. It is also interesting to note that the words heresy and factions come from the same Greek word! In other words, if you're supposed to stay away from heretics, then you must also stay away from factions, factions being the equivalent of separating yourself from others. If you question this connection, I can show you some resources that would show that factions and separations are synonymous.

B. Word Study of Various Contexts in Which Separation of Believers Occur

When someone chooses to leave a local church, they may, in the vast majority of cases, have never considered the implications of what Scripture says when

speaking of professing Christians separating from one another. There are several words which speak of *separation*, at least to some degree:

- Separation-*aphorizo*

This is a word, which speaks of departing from one another and is used ten times in the New Testament. Be careful about using two common examples people give when they are attempting to justify leaving/separating from one another: *Abram & Lot* and *Paul & Barnabas*. We are not told in Scripture what their sharp disagreement was precisely, and there is no evidence that their separation was a godly action on the part of either of them. Abram's and Lot's example is also a dubious use of Scripture to justify our action which may otherwise be seen as an unbiblical separation covered by the following passages:

- ❖ Acts 19:9-Paul separating from hardened, disobedient Jews
- ❖ 2 Corinthians 6: 17-Paul is commanding that believers separate from unbelievers
- ❖ Galatians 2:12-Paul describing Peter as one who was sinfully separating himself from the believing Gentiles because of the pressure of the Judaizers

- **Division/Dissension – *dixostasia***

This is a word that means to "stand apart."

- ❖ .Romans 16:17 – Paul is warning the Roman believers to be aware of those who cause dissensions and stay away from them
- ❖ Galatians 5:20 – Paul says dissensions are a fruit of the flesh

- **Factions/Heresies – *hiresis*** (sometimes translated, "sect")

This means to "choose," an "opinion," a "heresy." It has the idea of someone professing a particular principle or opinion, which would later, as contrasted with the faith, a causing of division, heretical factiousness.

- ❖ Galatians 5:20
- ❖ 1 Corinthians 11:19
- ❖ 2 Peter 2:1
- ❖ Titus 3:10

- **Enmity/Hatred/Hostile – *exthra*** (translated "enmity," as well as "hating," or "hatred")

This carries the idea that you are at war with someone and that you are contending with them.

- ❖ Luke 23:12
- ❖ Roman 8:7
- ❖ Galatians 5:20
- ❖ Ephesians 2: 15-16
- ❖ James 4:4

- **Strife/Wrangling/Contention** – *eris* (most often translated "strife")

This carries the idea that you are causing trouble and strife with one another.

- ❖ Romans 1:29; 13:13
- ❖ 1 Corinthians 3:3
- ❖ 2 Corinthians 12:20 (notice also, "angry tempers," "disputes," "slanders," "gossip")
- ❖ Philippians 1:15
- ❖ 1 Timothy 6:4
- ❖ Titus 3:9

Conclusion:

It is a very serious thing to separate yourself from other Christians. You must do so only as a last resort, and only when Biblically permissible. May the Lord help us obey His Word!

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