

WHEN SOMEONE LEAVES *(30 years of lessons about when someone leaves the church)*

(The following is a "composite" illustration. It is made up of bits of many true stories. The names are all different).

"Pastor, how do you handle it?" Martha asked. "I feel like my heart has been torn out. Didn't you marry this couple? Didn't their relatives find salvation here at this church? Why, not too long ago the husband told me that this is one of the best churches he has ever been to in his life! How can they just leave? I am saddened and struggling with anger. Why does it hurt so deeply? Didn't they sign the same membership covenant as me? I know that our church is not perfect but they vowed before God to work to maintain unity and resolve conflict. Don't they care about the love we have shown to them for these last three years? I've been weeping on and off since I found out."

This is a common comment asked of me when someone leaves a church. Having been in ministry for over thirty years I have had to endure many people leaving a church for a variety of reasons. Some reasons are good and biblical while some reasons are not.

When is it biblical to leave a church?

1. *The church sends you out to do mission work.* In this case everyone is joyful and the mission couple has been tried and proven under the oversight of the spiritual leaders. Fellowship continues
2. *The member leaves for good personal reasons:* job, marriage, to get medical care, an older member leaves to live with their children, schooling, and so on. The church usually puts on a going away party and all are joyful. Fellowship continues.
3. *If a person's theological position changes.* If a person has been attending our church and no longer believes either essential or important theological doctrines which we believe, then it is appropriate to leave and find a church with which they agree on those important doctrines. For example, if a person became charismatic or Presbyterian or anti-Calvinistic, or no-lordship then it would be right to talk those issues through with leadership, and if no doctrinal unity could be achieved then they would be obligated to move to a church which holds their views rather than stay and be divisive. The person is encouraged to build fellowship in their new church.
4. *When a church exercises church discipline.* The person who is in unrepentant sin must be taken away from among you (1 Cor. 5:2, 5, 11). This is sad but is commanded by God. Fellowship does not continue.
5. *Conscience issues.* The local church has no authority over a person's conscience (1689 chapter 21). If a believer, acting in a good and sincere conscience before God, believes that he would be in sin to participate in some regular practice of the church they should not break their conscience but should leave (1 Cor. 8:7, 12; 10:27).

However, they should leave only after discussing their conscience issue with their local church spiritual leaders, and humbly seeking to inform their conscience.

For example, some Christians believe that women **must** wear headscarves in worship. They believe it would be sin not to wear a headscarf. They would be grieved every Sunday at our church. They should talk this through with the leaders. However, if they cannot change their belief on that conscience issue then they should leave.

When is it unbiblical to leave a church?

1. It is wrong to leave a church over bitterness due to unresolved conflict (Heb. 12:15).
2. It is wrong to leave a church over personality differences (1 Cor. 1:12) "I am of Paul..."
3. It is wrong to leave a church over unimportant, non-saving issues. Some people fight and split over whether the new church building should have chairs or pews. Should we sing hymns or modern songs?
4. It is wrong to leave a church over issues which are important without talking them through with the pastors and spiritual leaders of the church, understanding the biblical teaching on that issue, and giving the church an opportunity to change if it is wrong. The seven churches of Revelation chapters 2 & 3 had all kinds of serious problems but Christ confronted them and gave them time to repent.
5. It is wrong to leave a church over personal offenses. Matthew 18 tells us what the procedure is if a brother sins against us.
6. It is wrong to leave a church over disagreements with the leadership over "how" a situation was handled. There will always be "another" and "different" way to handle some issue. Hindsight is always 20/20. Trust that your spiritual leaders want God's will and are pursuing it. Your spiritual leaders talk many things through thoroughly that you know nothing about.
7. It is wrong to leave a church over disagreement over accountability issues i.e. "I don't like being held accountable for evangelism, church attendance, etc." It is the shepherd's responsibility to hold you accountable.

What is the right way to leave a church?

1. Remember your membership covenant vows (Ecclesiastes 5)
2. Submit to your church leadership (Heb. 13:7, 17). Talk honestly and humbly with your local church spiritual leaders about your questions. Be teachable!! It just may be that you are the one who is wrong.
3. Honestly walk through the sheet: "*Questions to Ask Yourself Before Leaving Your Church*".