



## Practical Application How To Leave a Church

by Chuck Gianotti

*From time to time, Christians leave one church to go to another, or at least think about it—and often without any guidance or godly counsel. Odd as it may seem, elders can prepare people in their own fellowships for this kind of thing. In fact, the thought about leaving, if considered rightly, can be a good thing and become a catalyst for growth in either the believer's life or in the assembly's life—or both. Read what one church has published in pamphlet form.*

One of the most excruciating decisions you will make as a Christian is to leave your home church. By this, I

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 an amicable, God-honoring way? Here are some thoughts that may help you think through your options.

### *Eight Things To Consider*

1. If you have been committed to your current church for some time, they are your spiritual family. The church is not an organization like a social club or a corporation. So 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, people 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. Those from whom

you seek counsel need not be part of the church you attend, but they should be godly, mature individuals.

4. Are you leaving because of unresolved conflict with someone? Matthew 18:15 (NASB) 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

*Odd as it seems, preparing people on how to leave your fellowship may be a good thing for them and for you.*

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 wrong 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.

One way to know if God is in your decision to move on is whether a) you have found or trained others as your replacement in ministries you have been involved in and b) you have made it clear there is no desire to draw away others with you.

6. Is your concern a matter of "worship style?" For some, the music makes the difference. It is true that the singing can be an indicator of the joy in the life of the church, but this is a very subjective thing and so must be considered carefully. A church can have a 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 the sense that you have been part of numerous churches and find problems with every one? This 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 church is made up of

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Recently in an informal discussion meeting, I gave some simple points about the purpose and functioning of the assembly breaking of bread meeting. Afterward, several young men confided that they had never heard an explanation of these things. I wondered how many other young believers have unspoken questions.

As stewards of God (Titus 1:7 KJV) elders desire to help younger Christians appreciate and participate in the activities of the local church. After all, the church as described in the New Testament is designed for participation, not stagnation. The Lord is seeking worshippers (John 4:23), not spectators.

Let's think about this unique time in which God's people gather to break bread. Volumes have been written on the subject, so we'll just stick to some basics, remembering that details of application differ throughout the world, but the underlying principles are timeless and workable in all cultures.

### Lessons in a Name

Did you ever think of all the different names used to describe this meeting of the church? Paul speaks of the Lord's supper (I Cor. 11:20); Luke refers to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42); and many people prefer the word "communion" (I Cor. 10:16). Some churches speak of the "eucharist" which is the Greek word for "giving thanks" (I Cor. 11:24) while others prefer terms like "the remembrance meeting" (based on the words of Jesus in Luke 22:19), or "the worship meeting" stressing the inevitable result of "seeing the Lord." I remember in younger days hearing the older folks talk about the "morning meeting."

How much can be understood from these expressions! By them we are reminded that Christians gather to remember the Lord Jesus, enjoy fellowship with Him, give thanks, worship and adore Him, and partake of meaningful symbols as He asked.

### The Purpose for Meeting

The scriptures disclose a number of different reasons why this is an important time in the life of the church, such

as showing the Lord's death, and being reminded of His return (I Cor. 11:26). But the main point is clearly that it is centered in a Person. This is interesting because from one perspective, we remember things about Him from the long past, and yet He still promises to meet with us when we gather! (Matt. 18:20). This point is unique to the Christian faith. Many religions reminisce about their prophet or founder, but the Chris-

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tian meets with Him on a regular basis!

Very often when Jesus revealed Himself in some special or unexpected way, the one to whom He revealed Himself responded in humble and simple words of worship and adoration. Worship thus becomes one inevitable result of being in the presence of the Lord.

### The Frequency of Meeting

Most Christian assemblies meet to break bread each week following the example of the early church (Acts 20:7). Other churches do so less often. This difference should never be a matter for pride or criticism, as no Scripture commands a certain frequency. The word "As often...." (I Cor. 11:26) allows liberty, and we can be thankful whenever true believers desire to obey the Lord's command. This is one point in which godly elders can uphold the unity of the body.

### The Worshippers

According to I Cor. 14:26, there is to be freedom for expression in the gathering of the believers. The actual wording is: "every one of you hath .... [something]," and assemblies have tried to honor this principle by encouraging the free exercise of the priesthood of the believer as regulated by various Scriptures that apply. More about this shortly.

### How Can Elders Help?

Without question, a large part of

elders' responsibility, is to lead by example as I Peter 5:3 makes clear: "Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." Elders can set a good example of what it means to worship the Lord "in Spirit and in truth." (John 4:23). But other Scriptures emphasize the active side of leading people. They must "feed the flock..." (Acts 20:28) and withstand false teachers (Titus 1:9f.). The thought of elders being stewards of God as mentioned earlier, reminds us of the strenuous efforts involved in running a household so that order is maintained, supplies are adequate, and workers know and do their parts. This includes insuring that the younger ones receive training to become a vital

part of the work. In this way, a sense of ownership is developed in the next generation so that in time they will be committed to the work of the church. Here are some things that elders can build into the thinking of young believers over the years, both by teaching, by example, and by gentle, practical reminders.

1. At the Lord's Supper, the Lord is present! He does not need to be taught about worship, He wants to be worshipped. It's not a bad idea to think of Him asking each one present, "What would you like to say to me?" This will go a long way to prevent excessive teaching at the breaking of bread.

2. More than any act or deed, however precious to us, we meet to remember a Person; Someone. If understood, this will keep us from the "what's in it for me" attitude so characteristic of the world. We are occupied first with One Who is worthy to be honored in His glorious Person.

3. Worship is a result, not a cause. A quick check of the concordance will reveal how few mentions of the word "worship" are found in the epistles. This is partly because worship is the overflow of a full heart, not a program. The wording is precise as to what the Father seeks: "true worshippers;" not as sometimes quoted, "The Father is seeking worship." Keeping hearts warm and relationships clear will prevent a mechanical, ritualistic tone to the gathering.

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While we all face challenges in our lives, sometimes those challenges, coupled with our daily responsibilities, leave us feeling drained, discouraged and depressed. The enemy of our soul loves to capitalize on these feelings. He whispers in our ear that we are justified to feel the way we do. Like the Psalmist, we can find ourselves "cast down." It is at these times that we need to lift up our eyes and remember that our help comes from the Lord.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" Ps 46:1 (KJV).

A part of that help for us in the church age is found in the fellowship of the saints. The many "one anothers" in the New Testament help us to understand the depth of love and care the Lord intended our relationships to take on. We function at our best when we are both giving and receiving, remembering that we are members one of another (Rom 12:5).

My husband and I have been the recipients of this kind of fellowship during the past year since the Lord called our daughter home to glory. What a comfort it has been to be surrounded by brothers and sisters, each ministering in their own special way. Each expression

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of love has meant so much, whether it has been the person who has shared a note of comfort and encouragement, wept with us as we wept, reminisced about past memories or offered intercessory prayer on our behalf. To our friends at ESN and especially to the women who reached out to me as a Mom and touched my heart with Christ's love, thank you so very much. The Lord has used all of you to help us along a some-

times bumpy road over the past twelve months. It has been a year of tremendous adjustment. We miss Bethany very much, but Jack and I can say, by God's grace, that we are not only thankful that she is with the Lord, we rejoice that she is in His presence! Her last words were,

"Thank you God....your plan is good." What a good reminder to each of us as we labor for the Lord. God's ways are perfect. We may not always understand what

He is doing in our lives, but we can trust Him. When the challenges arise, may we lift our eyes and look "for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ." Whatever we are going through here will be so insignificant in the life to come. May we continually encourage one another as we see that day approaching. We need one another as never before. 

## Instruction (cont. from page 2)

4. There will always be quiet brothers in the church. But part of maturing in Christ is learning to participate openly in worship. This is not easy for many men, and may be one reason why sisters are asked to be silent in the gathered church (I Cor. 14:34) as the men learn to speak. Elders should make it clear that God hears silent and audible worship equally well! The vocal part has to do with leading, not the right or ability to worship.

5. The Spirit of God is the ultimate Leader of worship. Different brothers participate in the meeting under His direction. We should not insist on a set "theme" in each meeting, for God is sovereign in His directing. But it is reasonable to think that He will direct the thoughts of the saints to some particular aspect of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus, and it delights us when we sense that focus.

6. Young believers will want to understand how they can contribute meaningfully. Scriptures like Psalms can be read as an act of worship or praise. The reading of a short passage is also helpful in reminding the worshippers of some facet of the Lord's Person or work.

When this is done, it is appropriate to respond to what has been shared collectively by singing a hymn, or by brothers leading in prayer (actually, it is more accurate to describe this as worshipping in prayer and singing).

In a different context, Paul instructs believers to "Tarry one for another" (I Cor. 11:33). The principle applies here. Just as in ordinary conversations among family members, one will wait courteously for others to respond to the subject being discussed before introducing a new subject, so it should be in worship. It can be distracting when someone quickly changes to a new train of thought before the people can respond to what has been offered. For this reason:

7. Silence need not be embarrassing. It can be a time for private meditation and responding to the Lord concerning what has been said. Elders can help people unacquainted with an open format to appreciate this important point.

8. Sometimes things are shared in the meeting which seem out of place, such as personal testimony of daily incidents or words of exhortation. This may simply indicate a need for growth, and all

should give thanks that a young believer has brought something to the Lord. But elders may want to consider if other, more suitable times are available for such thoughts to be expressed. Perhaps the Lord's Supper is the only open time available to the congregation. Some have solved this problem by providing a brief time after the breaking of bread for ministry, exhortations, etc.

### Conclusion

A healthy church (and a healthy Christian) will follow the example of the earliest disciples who "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). What a precious gift God has given us in these things! As we hear Him speak through His word (teaching), we are transformed into different people expressed in godly relationships (fellowship). This moves us to pour out our hearts to the One Who loves us (breaking of bread) and seek His help for every aspect of life (prayer). As one asked long ago: "Who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor. 2:16). 

## Leaving a Church (cont.)

sinner 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 the Lord wants to develop in you the character of grace and forgiveness towards others' imperfectness or sin? Maybe 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—so it is essential that you walk in step with the Spirit of God when considering leaving.

### What Now?

OK, what if after all this you feel God is leading you to leave? First, meet with one or more of the elders to discuss your concerns. Be open to their response, listening for their burdens, struggles and thinking. There may be a misunderstanding or clear disagreement—but there needs to be clarity! If they disagree with your assessment of things, that doesn't mean they are being defensive. Remember, this is a two-way communication.

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

1. A brief acknowledgement of what God has done in your life through your

fellowship at the church (it is always good to begin with "good news" before you bring on the "bad news"). Don't forget to thank them 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 (for example, talked with one or more of the elders or leaders, tried to make changes, etc.).

3. If you have negative reasons for leaving then describe your concerns clearly, without going into 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 what your plans are for the next stage of your spiritual journey. They will be concerned that you do not drift out into the world, but find a good fellowship 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 in which you have been involved.

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 regarding His Body. In all your conversations with other members of the church, let your words be seasoned with grace. Assume 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 announcement that conveys the matter clearly and graciously to the rest of the church. This will ensure that everyone is hearing the same thing. Show respect for the body 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 what they are thinking. Therefore, grace along with meekness is the better response. Commit to pray genuinely for the church, its leadership and its people. 

*Note: Feel free to use, modify or make any or all this article your own. CG*

## ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

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