

WHEN THEY LEAVE

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Tension in church, even in the best of churches, is to be expected. The church where the Bible is faithfully taught at every worship service and where the people are serious about their love for Christ and where their commitment to serve Him is unwavering... yes, even those churches go through episodes of tension.

The reasons are many and varied, but like every family the local church will experience stressful times. These times may involve differences of opinion (even arguments), financial pressures and hardships, building programs, changes in pastors or changes in programs or changes in the way things have been done, questionable decisions by leaders in various church ministries, differing preferences, sinful choices of people in the church, and many, many other circumstances. There is no doubt that tension in church is to be expected.

Satan wants to divide the local church and bring shame upon the local testimony for Christ. Sometimes he stokes the fire of conflict when all that was present was tension. Remember, tension and problems in the church are not the same as conflict. The wise pastor knows the difference and he seeks whenever possible "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

But what is most difficult for every local church family is when people decide to leave the church. That is a unique tension perhaps every congregation has to face. It is especially painful when those people are loved and appreciated, and yet still decide to go to another church. Their departure can be heartbreaking, leaving the congregation with questions and their (former) church family reeling.

This is a tension few pastors like to address.

Reasons They Leave

According to God's plan we are not called to serve alone, but rather we are called *together* as a local church in order to serve Christ *together*, as a body. Yet serving together can be challenging, stressful and often times exasperating. And most of us would acknowledge that often the reasons people in America have for leaving a church are shallow and petty. Some people leave church because they don't like the new hymn books or singing songs projected on a screen. Others leave because the color of the new paint or carpet was not their choice and they don't like way the decision was made ("no one listened to me"). I know of people who left their church because the starting times for Worship services and Sunday School were moved half an hour (in one church, the 30 minute change was earlier while in another church the 30 minute change was later).

Some left in anger over an issue long forgotten by all in the church but them. Some were forced out by heavy-handed and tyrannical leadership. Some leave out of boredom. I've heard all kinds of reasons for people leaving a church.

But are there legitimate reasons for leaving a church? As John MacArthur has written: “There are times when it becomes necessary to leave a church for the sake of one's own conscience, or out of a duty to obey God rather than men. Such circumstances would include:

- If heresy on some fundamental truth is being taught from the pulpit (Galatians 1:7-9).
- If the leaders of the church tolerate seriously errant doctrine from any who are given teaching authority in the fellowship (Romans 16:17).
- If the church is characterized by a wanton disregard for Scripture, such as a refusal to discipline members who are sinning blatantly (1 Corinthians 5:1-7).
- If unholy living is tolerated in the church (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).
- If the church is seriously out of step with the biblical pattern for the church (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14).
- If the church is marked by gross hypocrisy, giving lip service to biblical Christianity but refusing to acknowledge its true power (2 Timothy 3:5).” [1]

According to those New Testament passages, there are legitimate reasons for leaving a church.

For Those Left Behind

Speaking from my own experience as a pastor, I can tell you how I felt whenever people left our church. My emotions ranged from sadness to embarrassment to confusion to a sense of betrayal to feelings of relief to a loss of confidence and a lot of second-guessing. As I quietly listened to the others in our congregation, I know those emotions were shared by many others as well.

Why did we feel those emotions, and more? I think it's because of love. We loved those people, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on who they were and how long we shared our lives together. We counted them as important members of the body. We worshipped together and prayed for each other and worked together in ministry and watched each other's families grow. We rejoiced when they rejoiced and cried when they cried, all because of love. And when our love was unreturned (at least that's how it felt when they left our church), it hurt badly.

I suppose we wouldn't want it any other way, would we? What does it say about a church or a pastor when people can leave the church and no one cares, no one notices? Sadly, that does happen. Stony silence or cold indifference should never mark a Bible-preaching church. But how can pastors, leaders and people respond when the inevitable occurs and folks leave the church? What should we do?

One pastor, after some people left their church, quoted to the remaining congregation 1 John 2:19 (“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us”). Another pastor eloquently recited the Apostle Paul's sad report regarding Demas (“Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed” 2 Timothy 4:10).

Sometimes 1 John 2:19 and 2 Timothy 4:10 do apply to people who leave the church, but often that is simply not the case. They *were* of us. They didn't love this present world. They just dropped out and are now attending another church. Do they deserve their former pastor saying "as far as I'm concerned, it's good riddance to bad rubbish" (as one pastor said to his Deacon Board, characterizing the people who left)?

How should we pastors respond in these sad and awkward episodes?

A Lesson for Pastors

In my first full-time ministry after graduating from seminary, I was a missionary church planter in Utah. Ours was a congregation of less than twenty people when I first arrived, so I had a great deal of work to do in order to see the church become self-supporting. And I had a great deal to learn about being a pastor, so God allowed me to receive a ministry-altering lesson in my second week. It came during an intimate conversation with one of the great young couples of our church plant, Mark and Mary Ann. [2]

I went to Mark and Mary Ann's home for a get-acquainted evening. I was their new pastor and like me, they were in their late 20s and were new parents. We had a number of shared interests and we hit it off immediately! Their story of a rather recent conversion to Christ (about five years earlier) was especially compelling to me since that's why I was in Utah: to lead people to Christ, disciple them, and establish a vibrant local church. It caught my attention that they heard the Gospel from another church in town. Ours was a suburb of a city with a metro area close to 175,000 people. But despite those numbers, there was a genuine scarcity of Gospel-preaching, Bible-teaching churches. So their testimony caught my attention.

I asked some more questions about their involvement in that other church. They not only came to know Christ there, but they ultimately taught a Sunday School class, served in the Youth ministry, sang in the choir, and took their turns as Nursery workers. Ours was a church start-up, with hardly any ministries besides Sunday services. I quietly wondered, "why did they leave their former, established church where they came to Christ and served so faithfully to become a part of our small, little start-up church plant?"

Toward the end of the evening, I made a passing comment about how much that other church must have missed them when they left. I said something like, "good people like you are so hard to find, especially out here in Utah." Mark gulped a few times and Mary Ann just hung her head in sorrow.

Mark began, "They didn't say a thing when we left. We trusted Christ in that church. We were there every Sunday for five years in a row and we did all those things, so we thought they surely would have missed us... But they made some changes in ministry direction and one Sunday we tried another church [the mother church of our church plant]. We liked it and we've been gone now for almost two years. We still have heard nothing from our former church." By that time Mark could hardly talk and Mary Ann gently wiped tears from her eyes.

This conversation put me on the other side of church-leaving. I had been a pastoral intern and a Youth Pastor, so I was on the inside of discussions about what to do when people left the church. And those negative emotions like sadness, embarrassment, and confusion were the ones I imagined Mark and Mary Ann's former church must have felt. So I cautiously defended the lack of communication.

But Mark and Mary Ann insisted that somehow, someday their former church should have reached out to them. I asked, "But would it have made any difference in you leaving?" and they said no it wouldn't. Surprised I asked, "Then why should they have contacted you?" And they said, "Because we wanted to know they loved us and missed us like we loved and missed them."

Then I told them how pastors always feel uncomfortable and awkward when people leave the church and we're unsure what to do. They said that's just how they felt too. So I wondered, "Even with all that difficult emotion, you still think your former pastor should've communicated, even met with you?" Their response was a quick and simple, "Yes!"

A Course of Action

Those questions and their answers were burned into my mind and I have never forgotten that lesson over all these years. I promised myself that night in Utah that whenever people left whatever church I was pastoring, I would do everything I could to communicate with them and extend a loving farewell to them. I haven't always been able to do that for various reasons, but it became one of those pastoral duties I tried my best to faithfully discharge.

Over the years the manner of communication varied, and as I matured as a pastor I think I got better at that difficult task. But I learned from Mark and Mary Ann that a pastor is still a pastor even as his sheep wander into another flock. And farewells are important among people who love each other. Words spoken (or not spoken) at farewells are long remembered, even written in granite.

After that night's lesson in Utah, here is the way I usually handled this delicate situation. First, when I noticed or heard about some people's absence from church, I would usually ask around among the congregation about the status of the missing folks. Friends almost always know when friends are gone on vacation or are attending to family obligations. But if I heard a report that they were thinking of leaving the church, I paid special attention the next Sunday. If they were still missing, I'd call them on the telephone the next week. Immediately after the surprised (and sometimes cold) initial greeting, I would say (with as calm a voice as I could) that I missed them in church over the past couple weeks and I heard they were thinking of going to another church and I was just checking to see if that was true. After some awkward silence, they would confirm the report. I would then ask if their decision was final. And if they told me it was, that's when my pastoral farewell began.

I would ask them the name of the other church they were considering attending. If it was a Bible-teaching church, I would tell them how sad I was that they were leaving our church and that I would miss them personally and our whole congregation would miss them. Then I would remind them of the areas of our church ministry where they served and how grateful we were for everything they had done through the years. I would try to be as specific as possible in this recitation of their service: in the Nursery or choir or Youth ministry or on the Missions Committee or as a Deacon or as Sunday School teacher. Then I would tell them I loved them and encouraged them to continue to grow in grace and serve Christ faithfully no matter where they attended church. I would carefully avoid unkind words and an accusing, defensive attitude.

Then I would ask a very important question: “Have I done anything to offend or hurt you for which I should seek your forgiveness?” I did not want them to harbor bitter feelings toward me if there was an unresolved issue between us. I did not want The Chief Shepherd to find me guilty of mistreatment of His sheep.

After we hung up (usually with a very positive response on the other side), that day I would write them a personal letter expressing similar sentiments as I did on the phone. But I put those words into writing because I wanted my letter to become a rock of remembrance in their lives. They needed to know they were loved in our church and we would miss them. But as their (now former) pastor, I was sending them off to continue in the lives I had urged them to live all the time that I was their pastor.

The practical benefit of such a send-off is that those left behind will hear about that farewell (and they will!) and they will be content knowing their friends were given a loving farewell. This can dispel lingering doubts about the pastor’s leadership. Often I would show the farewell letter to the elders and deacons so they could be assured how the ending was handled. Everyone seemed to appreciate my efforts and I was satisfied that I was attempting to be a good shepherd of Christ’s sheep.

Bad Partings

Of course, there are some cases in church when such a loving farewell is not possible. We had our share of church discipline cases and we handled those differently, according to Matthew 18:15-18. When those people left, it was due to sin and we prayed for their spiritual restoration. There were other people who left church simply to go fishing or hunting every weekend or sleep all day on Sunday or to pursue other non-spiritual activities. Because such choices demonstrated a genuine spiritual deficiency in their lives, we continued to reach out to those people to bring them back to the flock. Many never returned.

But those left behind in church must be certain that they handle the departure process in a godly fashion. Yet I have heard about tremendous anger after some church partings, with all sorts of wreckage caused by the people who left. But it also works both ways. The sheep aren’t the only ones who leave church with a bad parting. One pastor felt wrongfully removed from the church and as his final farewell, he trashed the parsonage.

No matter who does the leaving, and no matter the circumstances of the leaving, it never gives anyone the opportunity to dishonor the Lord and disobey His commands.

Conclusion

Do you have a legitimate, Scriptural reason for leaving your church? Check over that list of reasons as cited by MacArthur at the beginning of this article and see if you are standing on the Bible or on something less in your departure.

In an article entitled “Confessions of a (Recovering) Church-hopper,” John Fischer wrote: “In our free-market, commodity-rich society, it’s understandable that we would approach church as we would a shopping mall of spiritual products and services. This is the way our culture operates... As consumers we reserve the right to pass judgment on the products and services we use, and the companies that service us begin to cater to our demands. ‘The customer is always right’ may work well at McDonald’s, but in a church it undermines the authority of the Word of God and the leaders God has called to represent Him. We do not go to a particular church to decide whether that church is doing everything right, but to hear from God and humbly find out where we went wrong that week in our own lives and what we need to do to make it right.” [3]

Maybe they’re just church-hopping. That is an American Christian behavior and it is not beneficial for anyone involved. But whenever people decide to leave the church, it is a unique tension. It is especially painful when those people are loved and appreciated, and yet still decide to leave. Their departure can be heartbreaking, leaving the congregation with questions and their (former) church family reeling.

This is a tension few pastors like to address. But it nonetheless is an important pastoral duty that must not be neglected.

END NOTES

1 John MacArthur, “When Should People Leave Their Church?”

<http://www.gty.org/Resources/Questions/QA120> (accessed May 10, 2012)

2 Mark and Mary Ann are not their real names. I have changed them here to protect their anonymity.

3 John Fischer, "Confessions of a Recovering Church Hopper," *New Man*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1996), pp. 60-70.