

Leaving Your Church for Another Close By

By Steve Burchett



At least initially, no one who believed and was baptized and came into the membership of the church in Corinth could then leave that church and join another close by. That was not an option since there was only one local church in the area. Every Sunday, and possibly other days, they all gathered at Gaius' house (cf. Romans 16:23). Church shopping was unheard of.

Times have changed in so many locations around the world. I live in a large city in the United States, and local church options are plentiful. This means that, when a problem arises in your current church, or you disagree with the direction the church is taking, or you just feel like a change, it's possible to attend elsewhere. Is this okay?

Membership?

If you have a low view of local church membership, or you don't even think it's a biblical concept, then you might not think leaving one church for another is significant. But a commitment to a local body of believers in which it can be said you have "joined" is taught in a number of ways in the New Testament. I'll just mention two. First, the Lord has given elders (pastors) to the church who are responsible to shepherd their individual flocks. Peter speaks to elders about "the flock of God that is among you" and "those in your charge" (1 Peter 5:2-3). And the writer of Hebrews says to believers, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account" (13:17). This all assumes a relationship of accountability and commitment between elders and church members.

Additionally, the practice of church discipline requires a clearly defined membership. In First Corinthians 5, Paul charges the church to remove a man from its fellowship who "has his father's wife" (vv. 1, 4-5). This excommunication was only possible because the man was considered *in* such that he could be *put out* (cf. vv. 11-13).

Leaving?

So membership is not only a biblical concept, but we also see that it is a needed concept — we need shepherds to guard our souls, and we need the type of accountability that will only be possible if there is an actual commitment to a specific group of believers.

What should we think, then, about members leaving a church for another close by?

First, members in good standing should be free to leave and go elsewhere. Technically, people are "free" to leave even if they are not in good standing. What I mean, though, is if someone is not facing church discipline, we should not feel like we must convince them to stay or even that it is absolutely God's will for the person to stay. You would hope that, before leaving, they would consult with the leaders who may really plead with them to stick around for one or more reasons. But if they are determined to go to another true church, praise the Lord for that, pray for them, and express your love for them as they depart.

Second, it is not always right to leave and join elsewhere. I am not thinking here about the person who is under church discipline, but other types of "leavers." One example is the person who is leaving behind broken relationships that need to be dealt with first. I once sat in a home of a couple who wanted to visit our church. There was a real problem, though — they had been in *nine churches* in our area, and it sounded as if each departure was because of relational conflict. The more I investigated, I realized what was going on, so I asked, "Have you ever considered the possibility that *you* are the problem?" They were stunned, but (I hope) convicted. I then encouraged them to go back to at least their previous church to be reconciled to their brothers and sisters there.

Another type of "leaver" who should think very hard before leaving is the person who is only leaving for personal preferences. This type of person might say, "The music at that church is so awesome and it just makes me feel closer to God." That may be true, but if we always settle for everything we prefer, and congregate with others who like the same vibe, then we might fail to display the unity in diversity that the gospel brings (read Ephesians!). Also, these types of "leavers" need to carefully consider not only what is being gained (like better music), but what is potentially being lost by leaving the current church (such as established pastoral care, developed relationships, accountability, etc.). It should be asked, "Is it really worth gaining that if you lose that?"

Third, wherever you are a member, joyfully and eagerly give of your time, resources, and energy to that particular body of believers and its leaders. If you must leave your church and go to another church close by, the best approach will be to dive in and give yourself wholeheartedly to that fellowship. That doesn't mean we shouldn't maintain relationships with believers of our previous church — God's church is bigger than one particular local church. But Christ's will for his followers is primarily for them to have specific elders who pastor them, a local body of believers who love them and keep them accountable, a fellowship where their spiritual gifts are discerned and used, and a body of believers that together engages the lost locally and invests in the spread of the gospel globally.

We live in a low commitment society. As Christ's people, let's go the opposite direction.

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