

## 7: Express gratitude to those who have poured into you.

Even in a church that is far less than ideal, someone has likely invested something into your life and soul. When it comes time to leave, it's appropriate to express genuine gratitude to the members and leaders of the church.

Because it is Christ's blood-bought Bride, leaving a church should not be a casual decision. Our loving Lord deserves that we treat His organism with care and reverence. So, when it comes to considering a departure from a church, it only makes sense that God's people would do so in a way that demonstrates utmost concern for truth and love.

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# How to Leave a Church



If you've been in a church for even a short time, you've experienced it. The pain of people leaving a church in an unhelpful manner. Maybe they just suddenly disappear. Maybe they slowly pull away. Perhaps they leave dragging undiscerning sheep with them. Or worse, they depart, leaving a trail of carnage.

Leaving a local church in an ungodly way is not without pain. People have poured into the individual; they've prayed for them; they've walked with them; they've exhausted themselves for them, and yet the individual leaves as if the church was nothing more than one of many hot dog stands at the county carnival.

Thankfully, that's not always the case. Many leave a church for good and godly reasons. There are seasons of life when it is necessary to move from one church to another. That's perfectly normal in God's providence. Even so, we should not take the decision lightly. In either case, here are a few suggestions for when it's time to leave a church.

### **1: Ensure that your reasons for leaving are Biblical.**

Too often, professing Christians can push eject from a church for reasons that are not God's. We can do this by elevating preferences to the level of Scripture. We need to be sure that the youth group issue that is a big deal to us is also a big deal to God. We ought to be certain that the struggle we have with music at the church is also a struggle for God. We should be certain that the doctrinal aberration for which we are leaving is also a Biblical doctrinal aberration.

Often people say something like, "Well, I think that the Lord is leading us to another church." Professing Christians sometimes throw around that phrase with breathtaking irreverence. The Lord is "leading" you? I hope we understand what we are saying. The Lord *lead* Abraham into Canaan. The Lord *lead* Israel out of Egypt. And you suppose that the Lord is leading you out of a local church? We better be absolutely sure that He is. What constitutes "the Lord leading us" will be covered in a future post, but suffice to say that our reasons for leaving must be submitted under correctly interpreted Scripture. The Bible does give guidance on what kind of a church to plug into. Even so, it might be safer to say something like, "I don't know if the Lord is leading me to leave this church. But I prefer this or that for these reasons, thus, I am leaving."

### **2: Get advice from the church leaders before making your decision.**

Biblically qualified elders are God's provision to shepherd and guide our souls until glory (Heb. 13:17, 1 Pet. 5:1-4). God calls us to hold them in appropriate esteem due to the shepherding-work they perform (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Recall, they will stand before the Lord one day and give an account for the flock. Do we realize how utterly sobering that is? Do we as Christians seek to align our lives in such a way to respect the Lord and this accounting He requires?

One implication of this is that Christians do well to transparently meet with church leadership when contemplating a departure from the church.

Too often church leaders are the last to hear about individuals leaving. That's a tragic thing, indeed. It's like a boss who is the last to hear that his employee is resigning. It's like a parent who is the last to hear that one of his sons is moving out. It's like a head coach who is the last to hear that one of his starting players is quitting the team.

If the elders are disqualified or there are no Biblical elders present, then that may change things a bit. But even then, Christians do well to meet with a church leader before deciding to exit. They should be involved in the decision making, and not merely informed of a decision. Sadly, elders will sometimes give unbiblical advice when it comes to the local church. Nevertheless, we ought to heed God's Word regarding elders' involvement in our lives and go to them before we suppose it is God's will for us to leave a church. If those elders are not disqualified, then we are to heed their counsel, insofar as they are not asking us to sin (Heb. 13:17).

### **3: Be sure to leave in good standing, Biblically speaking.**

Bolting from a church in poor standing is tragically common. Perhaps Christians in a church are loving a sinning individual in the church enough to take the initial steps of church discipline (Matt. 18:15-17). And what happens? The sinning individual bolts, and for no Biblical reason. A church leadership team cares enough for God, His church, and a straying individual to move to step three of discipline (Matt. 18:17), and he runs to a church across town who fails to practice discipline. It is not God's will for a professing Christian to eject from a New Testament kind of church if he is in poor standing.

Christians are to work with church leadership to repent of sin prior to ejecting, so that they can honor God by leaving in good standing, as Scripture defines.

### **4: Do what you can to find and equip a church member to replace your ministry position prior to leaving.**

In God's extraordinary kindness, He has given every Christian spiritual gifts to use for the building up of His blood-bought church (1 Cor. 12:7, Eph. 4:11-16, 1 Pet. 4:10-11). God loves the church so much, that He has not withheld the joy and privilege of ministering to the local body from even one Christian. We all get to own the Kingdom in some way.

So, when it comes time to leave our church, we ought to be sure that we do what we can to not leave the Body without a functioning body part. If a liver is leaving a body for another, that liver needs to be replaced with another functioning liver. So it is in the Body of Christ.

Whether you have the privilege of serving as a greeter, on clean-up crew, in the media team, or in the children's ministry, one thing is for sure; every ministry matters. We ought not leave without working with ministry leaders to find and equip a church member to replace us where possible. It's only basic Christian love and maturity to do so. And, doing so demonstrates care for the Lord's church, care for the people serving and being served in those ministries, and diligence to treat others as you want to be treated (Matt. 7:12). If you were running a company, you wouldn't want people bailing from the company, leaving a gap in the team. How much more when it comes to the Body of Christ?

### **5: Ask your church leaders to help you plug into your next New Testament local church before leaving.**

When you move to a new city, you look for a place to live and work before arriving. So it should be, and more so, when it comes to leaving a church. Wisdom suggests looking for a good church beforehand.

Out of all creatures in the animal kingdom, God does not liken us to something as a strapping, strong, solo beast like a panther, snow leopard, or a rhinoceros. Quite the contrary. Instead, we are likened to a feeble, goofy, flock animal; sheep. So, it comes as no surprise that God calls us to exist under the visible shepherding of elders (Heb. 13:17, 1 Pet. 5:1-3). Like sheep, we need shepherding. Like sheep, shepherding is a benefit for all of us.

Thus, when it comes to leave a flock, we do well to be ready to transfer into another. Sheep are not meant to be solo roamers. In fact, roaming, flockless sheep usually end up sick, in danger, or dead. It follows, then, that where possible, we ought to ask our church leaders to help us find our next New Testament local church.

### **6: Consider leaving with a transfer letter from your elders.**

Christians often brought and received recommendation letters from other churches in New Testament times (e.g. Rom. 16:1-2, Eph. 6:21-22, Phil. 2:19-30). These letters greatly help the next church to expedite care to that individual. For example, the previous church leadership can discuss the individual's previous ministry participation, areas of strengths and weaknesses, shepherding needs (if any), unique needs, and any other information that will help the receiving church extend shepherding-care.