

Under what circumstances may I leave my church? Does the Bible ever allow or even compel us to move from my church to another congregation?

We live in an age of consumerism and this leaves us accustomed to prioritizing our needs and, even more so, our desires, above all else. We march out of stores that do not carry the products we want at the prices we demand; we customize our lives, from the clothes we wear to the cell phones we carry. In all things we are sovereign, we are discerning consumers who demand that things be done our way.

But church is an area where consumerism ought to be the furthest thing from our minds. At church we are part of an involuntary community which is pieced together by God. We are placed under spiritual authorities and are to be subject to them. We need to be very careful, then, to examine our hearts and examine our motives before withdrawing membership from a church. Sadly, though, there are certain situations in which this becomes a necessity.

There are good reasons to leave a church and there are bad reasons to leave a church. I dare say that there are far more bad reasons than good reasons. There are times where you *must* leave and times when you *may* leave.

You Must Leave

Most of the reasons you *must* leave relate to leadership. If the leaders of a church show contempt and disregard for the Bible and for sound doctrine, you are called to separate yourself from them. And it may well be that the only way to do this is to leave your church (though in some circumstances you may be able to have the leaders removed).

Here are four situations in which the Bible tells you that you must leave a church.

If the teaching is heretical (Gal. 1 :7-9).

If the leaders of a church are teaching what is outright heresy, you must separate yourself from that church. Staying to fight the battle is likely to make less of a statement than separating yourself from the church and its leaders, declaring them to be the heretics they are. The Bible declares that they are accursed, that they are anathema. Of course before you do this, be sure that what they are teaching truly is heresy and not merely something you disagree with.

If the leaders tolerate error from those who teach (Rom. 16: 17). We are called to separate ourselves from leaders who tolerate unbiblical alternatives to the doctrines that are most fundamental to the faith. These people, in allowing such teaching to stand, cause division. God demands that you remove yourself from such a church.

If there is utter disregard for biblical church discipline (1 Cor. 5 and 2 Thess. 3:6,14). If a church refuses to call its people to the Bible's standard of holy living and if it refuses to exercise church discipline, you must remove yourself from that church. A church that tolerates blatant sin is no true church at all.

If the church is marked by utter hypocrisy (2 Tim. 3:5). This passage refers to a particular kind of hypocrisy in which the church has the appearance of being marked by godliness and yet denies that the Holy Spirit is the true sources of this godliness. It is happy to look like it is Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered and yet it is actually a mockery of God in that the leaders deny His power and presence.

If there is gross hypocrisy or heresy, if there is no demand for holiness among the leaders or membership, if there is error being tolerated by those who preach, the Bible tells you to separate yourself from that church.

You May Leave

There are also reasons for which we may choose to leave. Though they are not the kinds of reasons that will force you to leave a church, they may well still be reasons that are good and wise. In all cases, a decision will require great care and much prayer.

If you desire better teaching. The Bible does not forbid you from leaving one church to go to another one that offers better teaching. In general this should be done not merely because a particular pastor is a better teacher but because another church has a more sound understanding of what comprises good teaching.

If you desire to use your gifts. If you have sought to use your God-given gifts and talents within your current church and have found no place to use them, you may wish to find a church where those gifts will be useful and where they will be appreciated.

If you desire a more convenient location. A decision may simply come down to convenience, where attending one church may save you a lot of time or allow you to serve in a local community instead of a distant one.

If it better serves your family. It may be, for example, that your kids are the only ones at your church. Moving to another church may open up many opportunities for them to grow in the faith or to serve within the church alongside other children.

There are few reasons for which you must leave a church and many for which you may. As a general rule of thumb, be very slow to withdraw your membership. Leave a church only with the greatest of care and the utmost humility.

One Final Thought

Especially when it comes to reasons for leaving that are not biblically mandated, seek to speak with your pastor before making a decision to leave your church. There may be something that can be done to address concerns that you have that are driving your decision.

It could be that the Lord would use you to provide a solution to a problem that needs addressing; or it could be that your concerns could be easily addressed, if only your pastor were made aware of them.

Whether you end up leaving or staying, in either case, speaking with your pastor before making the final decision could be used of the Lord to help the church improve.

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When Should I Leave My Church?

By Tim Challies