

When and How to Leave a Church

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- [0 : 00] Well, good morning. This is the second week of a two-week break from our verse-by-verse exposition of John's gospel. I'd still like for you to join me in John's gospel in chapter 17 and verse 3.
- This will be the first text that we'll turn to today. This morning we're going to think a bit together about when and how to leave a church.
- If you are going to be connected meaningfully to the life of a church, you will experience the loss of people that you care about. It is inevitable that people will leave a church.
- Some for legitimate, reasonable, healthy reasons. Reasons that we would be glad to send people out of our church.
- And their departure, it's handled with great maturity. We walk together through that process. Sometimes, this is sadly not the case.
- [1 : 15] So today I want to take a bit of time to think about good reasons to leave a church. With some additional comments about when and how not to.
- We don't have a lot of explicit biblical data to derive conclusions from on this topic. We do see in the Bible people sent from one place to another for a particular purpose.
- And we do see letters commending the acceptance of people sent. However, our complex Christian society requires that we come to some conclusions implicitly.
- Which I hope to help us do so faithfully. By complex, I mean we live in a saturated marketplace, if you'll allow. There are churches all over.
- So how do we navigate both joining a church and then in some cases, leaving one? All of that said, do be discerning.
- [2 : 23] Anytime you hear teaching from the Bible. A guest, a guest member. Anytime you hear teaching from the Bible. Especially so when the Bible is approached topically and implicitly.
- So be discerning. Anytime we open God's Word together. Be especially so this morning. It's easy. We have seen people do this over and over and over again.
- To use the Bible to say what they want to say. And that's certainly not my desire this morning. I want you to hold me accountable. Are we being faithful to the text as we try to derive wisdom from it on topics like this?
- Now, so much could be said here. I could go on and on and on. I've been a pastor now for almost 17 years.
- And so I have experienced loss across those years. So to keep me from just rambling on, I've structured our time around three characteristics of a local church that I think will help us think well on this matter.
- [3 : 35] So a bit of an outline for you to my rambling. And here it is. The church is, number one, theological, confessional, and therefore convictional.
- And you'll actually find this in your bulletin this morning. Secondly, the church is relational. And thirdly, the church is missional.

Let's pray together. Father, as we take some time this morning to think on this topic, I pray that you would help us to do so biblically.

I've got a spattering of texts throughout my notes. I pray that you'll help us to take them up and to think about them, your word and how it applies to this particular matter.

Help us to have our affections for you increase as we spend these moments together. And help us to have our affections for the thing you are most affectionate for, your church also increase.

[4 : 43] We need your help. If anything is going to be done this morning that is of any real benefit to any of us, we certainly need your spirit to work in us, in my speaking and in our hearing.

I pray that you'd apply this carefully to our hearts. We pray this for your glory in Christ's name. Amen. So when to leave a church.

First, the church is theological. And I could say it's theological and therefore confessional and therefore convictional. A church is a group of people who gather regularly for a specific purpose.

What is that purpose? Church is made up of Christian people and we gather to worship our God for his glory and our good.

That's why we do this. Lots of other great things happen in the life of a church, right? Eggs are exchanged. And essential oils purchased.

[5 : 50] But that's not why we exist as a church. Neat byproducts, right? It is altogether possible. And we should not miss this.

It's altogether possible to worship the right God wrongly or to have the trappings of worship in order.

So appearance of right worship. But to worship a God of our own making. So the church must be. It is necessarily theological.

We have to do theology to be a church. The study of God. And we study his word so that we can know him by it.

How do you turn to John chapter 17 and verse 3. Here Jesus says, And this is eternal life. I want the definition of eternal life for me.

[6 : 50] What is eternal life? This is eternal life. That they know you. That they know you. The only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

To be a Christian is to be a theologian. Not merely to know about God, but to know him.

That's a serious thing that we do. And we ought to do it seriously. J.I. Packer in his seminal work, Knowing God, said this.

Quote, What is my ultimate aim and object in occupying my mind with the things of God? What do I intend to do with my knowledge about God once I have it?

For the fact that we have to face is this. If we pursue theological knowledge for its own sake, it is bound to go bad on us.

[7 : 56] End quote. It's going to lead to pride. It's going to puff us up. We want to know God and therefore live our lives in accordance with his commands.

And so, the church, it must be theological. And it should be no surprise to anybody that it is. We read and we pray and we read out loud to one another.

And we sing and we preach and we hear preached. The word of God. We are theological. And because of that, we have to decide what the Bible says about some things.

We can't say we're theological, study God's word to know him by it, and then shrug our shoulders about what he teaches from it. We ought to say it says something.

And churches do this, of course. And so, we're confessional. We write down what we believe the Bible says. And because of this, we are therefore convictional, or should be at very least.

[9 : 01] Right? What we believe the Bible teaches about something, we ought to actually live in accordance with that. So, should you leave a church, if anyone in the church disagrees with you about anything?

Certainly not. There are people who think in this way. If so, each of us would be left to our private study.

And we would all be worse for it. Not a single one of us doesn't need the church to help us to grow in the truth. So then, if that's not the case, what does constitute a significant enough disagreement to leave a church over?

How should we think about this? And thus, I parade in the idea, once again, to you of theological triage. So, in your notes, I've listed this out for you.

I've listed it in order. First, second, third, fourth. Although, I'm going to talk about it a little bit out of order. If you're entirely new to the concept, the idea of triage is assigning importance to something.

[10 : 14] So, my classic example is, if a bus of people was in an accident, and they all got rushed to the emergency room, very quickly, a charge nurse or doctor is going to assign importance to the injuries that are being experienced there.

Right? What needs the most attention? And we can give the same concept to theology. Those doctrines that we hold. So, the last of these, and I like to say them this way because I like to say the word quaternary.

Quaternary doctrine, or fourth order doctrine. I used to say it's unimportant, but I like to say it this way instead. It's important for no one.

Stuff that just doesn't matter. My example is always, is there life on other planets? Interesting to think about. Important for no one.

We'll see. I don't care. Then, we can pick up tertiary doctrine, or third order doctrine, which is important for you.

[11 : 24] Right? Not unimportant, but important for you, and perhaps your family, and those that you have influence over. So, these are things that you ought to have some conviction about, but we don't all have to share the exact same conviction.

So, an example might be, what kind of television do we allow in our homes? Some allow no television in their home. That's a fine conviction to have. Some allow for some.

There are certainly some television no Christian should allow in their home, but there's some gray area in between. How are we trying to be wise in what we allow into our home?

Another example I thought about this morning, as I got ready for the morning, how do we think about our Second Amendment rights? Men, do you carry? Do you not carry?

Are there convictions that back the actions that you take? We don't have to agree on this to be Christians in fellowship together.

[12 : 27] So, turn with me and let me show you an example of this from Romans chapter 14. This is the first six verses. This lays out this idea for us. There Paul writes, As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. And the issue at hand here is meat offered to idols. You could argue this is an important gospel issue, freedom that we have in Christ.

And Paul is saying, it's an opinion that we should not quarrel over. Verse 3, Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Another example, although we don't know exactly the nature of it, I think this is about the Sabbath. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.

[13 : 43] Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God.

While the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord, and gives thanks to God. So there are convictions at work here, all meant to please God.

Tertiary, third order, important for you. And I'll tell you, beloved, I like conversations in this realm, because I want to be wise.

I want to think about God's commands, and how to apply them in the world in which we live. No one's having conversations in Paul's day about whether or not to put a gun on their back before they put on their jacket.

They're not talking about this. So help me think. Think with me. Let's take up God's word. Let's push and pull at each other, and let's not divide over things that fall into this category.

[14 : 45] Okay, back to the top. Primary doctrine. First order doctrine. Doctrine that is important for everyone.

Everyone needs the good news of Jesus Christ. These would be doctrines, truths that must be believed in order for a person to be saved.

I said to you all through our study of Romans here recently, that that's the hill we want to die on. Because people are dying.

We want to stand firm on those doctrines that people must believe that they might have the salvation of their souls. Primary doctrine.

So, there's a creator God who is holy and has a standard by which we are to live. He is the creator.

[15 : 48] We are creation. He has the right to demand something of us. And all of us have failed to live up to that standard. All of us have broken His commands.

We call this failure sin. And it creates a great problem for us. The greatest of problems. We often speak of the world as broken.

And it is, to be sure. When we speak of ourselves, apart from God's intervening work, we are dead because of sin. And eternal death is what belongs to us.

But Jesus, God incarnate, came and lived a perfect life. He did not inherit Adam's guilt because he was born of a different line.

He was born of a virgin. Mary. He kept the law perfectly. He fulfilled that demand of God on us so that He could give it to us by faith.

[16 : 59] He died a sacrificial death so that He could take away the penalty that our sin has bought for us. And He was raised on the third day.

Triumphed over death. Showed Himself. Proved that He was in fact God incarnate. The Messiah. The One who takes away the sins of the world.

And so now, we can repent. And we can believe. We can cling to Him and have this beautiful transaction happen between us where He takes away our punishment and gives to us His righteousness so that we can be justified and adopted into God's family.

Justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. First order doctrines important for everyone.

Jude, verse 3 and 4. Jude writes, Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you, contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

[18 : 10] I think this is what he's talking about. First order types of doctrines. The faith once for all delivered to the saints. Why do I think this? Because in verse 4 he says, For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Undermine the gospel itself. And he's writing to them to contend for that faith. Primary doctrine. It matters greatly.

And then we come to secondary doctrine or second order doctrine, which is important for us. These are the types of doctrines that are good for us to generally agree on to be in fellowship in a church.

They're going to define our practice and in some cases possibly define sin. What will a church determine to be sin or otherwise?

Some examples. Like via view on divorce and or remarriage after divorce. There are some disparate views out there and we should know what we think is allowed and not allowed with some boundaries.

[19 : 38] Right? The regulative principle. Right? How do we think we are supposed to gather together? What does the Scripture say we should do when we come together? And then there's always the classic example of our view on baptism.

Right? A way that we are theological and then confessional and then convictional. We're going to practice this ordinance in a particular way because of what we believe the Scripture teaches on the matter.

So our church has two confessional standards. Right? We ask of every member of our church to affirm, so fully agree with, the Apostles' Creed. This is not a big ask.

It's first order kind of stuff. Things we should believe to be true in order to be saved. And then we have a much denser document that we approved this year, Providence Baptist Church Confession of Faith.

It's a lot more. There's a lot more going on in this. But we don't expect that everybody in the church fully comprehends or fully agrees with everything found in this document.

[20 : 46] We ask that our elders affirm this document and that it's the teaching standard for the church. So it contains within it those things that are first order and those things that are second order doctrines.

Right? We have to have some views about some things. It's important that we are theological, confessional, and convictional. So, Christian people need to be thinking in this way and wrapping up their thoughts about when to leave a church with those things that are of secondary order.

If you're debating over first order stuff, we'd love to talk with you and teach you, but you just may not be a Christian. Okay? If you're all a Christian, you believe those first order, important gospel doctrines, there's a lot of things that can be considered in that second category.

Again, baptism, a very classic example of this. There are reasons that there are paedo-baptist churches in our community that baptize infants and churches that don't only baptize professing Christians.

But as we do this, the very best Christian thinking is, number one, deferential.

[22 : 11] Deferential. That is, respectful and humble. You and I only know anything that we know because of the grace of God.

I have not arrived at any grand truth on my own. I would be cut off from, I would not know, would not behold any of the majesty, could not take up the Bible and read if it wasn't for the grace of God in my life.

So we ought to think together and we ought to do so deferentially in this way. Now you may know that I love church history. This is the primary reason that I love it, right?

Among some other things. And that is because church history has taught me that I am currently wrong about something. There's no character in church history as much as we appreciate them that was right about everything.

You can identify it. Oop, can't agree with them on that matter. That has to mean that I am currently wrong about something. If I knew what it was, I would fix it immediately, but I don't know what it is.

[23 : 27] And so I want to be humble. You're in the same boat as I am. All learning, sorting, right? Approaching God's Word with humility.

To me, just the second point, the very best Christian thinking is biblical. Of course, right? Of course. This goes without saying Christians should think biblically and I do mean that.

They should think biblically. They should take up the Bible. But beyond that, I mean that we should spend way more time in our Bibles than we do in other formats.

Hear this way more time than we do listening to podcasts or watching our favorite guy on YouTube or in books.

You know how I love books. Or even from sermons. books. You should spend lots of time in your Bible.

[24 : 34] If I could snap my fingers if it was granted to me to snap my fingers and do something for the health of our church, this is what I would ask of our church. That everybody read their Bible every day.

Meditate on its truths and pray it. I would ask God that they would believe what the Bible teaches and that he would do what he said he's going to do and we wouldn't be on social media.

Social media is not necessarily evil, but we're getting far too much from it than we should. Meet with God in the Bible.

Something happens in our culture. A hot moment happens. Let God's word be the thing that springs into your mind. Not some guy you think is going to have an opinion about the matter.

Rush off to see what he or she might have to say. Let God speak to you about the issue at hand. It is far too easy to be convinced.

[25 : 41] I'm in the same boat with you on this. It's far too easy to be convinced of something by someone articulate who references the Bible rather than thinking biblically.

So the very best Christian thinking is deferential, it is biblical, and thirdly, it is relational. It's relational. Think with others who know you and who can keep an eye on you.

And beloved, this means that we have to slow our thinking down sometimes. Did you know that you don't have to form a strong opinion about stuff in a week? Social media would have you think otherwise. So you can take a little time, slow down, take a beat, think carefully, and think with others, right?

You can have the right doctrine, but you can hold it wrongly, create pride in you, misapply it in some way. Allow your pastors the privilege of thinking with you.

We want to walk through complicated things. We're trying to think too and think biblically. And I will tell you, speaking on behalf of your elders, we often feel like a quiet whisper in the corner of a very loud room.

[27 : 06] And I just don't think this should be the case. I don't think that I should have to compete with whatever talking head is out there on the internet. I can tell you this, I'm not going to compete in the same medium.

I'm not gifted enough to do that. If I spent all my time trying to produce videos, I wouldn't have time for anything else. And they would be bad. They just wouldn't be good. I tried to shoot a couple videos across the COVID era, and it took me forever to do it.

Boy, I was pitiful at the whole process. Perhaps because we know each other. There's some relational equity here.

There's some God-given authority for the way a church ought to function. We could talk a little more and arrive at truth together. We want to think with you.

And if we don't do this together, you may miss out on some correction of your beliefs or attitudes, maybe some warning for believing something that could be totally true, but where it could lead.

[28 : 14] And then hear this really carefully, we may miss out on the same. Love me enough to think with me because I'm not going to be perfect all the time, and I need you to also help me to think.

So the very best Christian thinking is going to happen in this way. And it means at times we're going to arrive at different conclusions. Faithful Christians throughout history have arrived at different conclusions.

Again, the matter of baptism. Pado-baptists and credo-baptists. One of us are right or we're both very wrong.

I don't know, but we've arrived at different conclusions for centuries and that's probably going to continue to happen, but let's do it together. Let's walk that process out in relationship with one another.

So that was the first point. First big point. The church is theological, confessional, and therefore convictional. Secondly, the church is relational.

[29 : 19] The church is relational. This is Ephesians chapter 4. Paul says, I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Like, to the gospel, to pursuing Christ, walk in a manner worthy of that, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is a divine reality that if we are in Christ, there is a unity of the Spirit.

And Paul is exhorting us here to do the work of maintaining that unity. There is a way, I have made the case to you before, for us to disagree agreeably, to be humble and gentle and patient and to bear with one another.

People are a mess. the church is messy because it is made up of imperfect people on a journey toward glory.

[30 : 40] If me being here, a member of this church first, a pastor of this church second, was contingent on me always enjoying all of you, I would have left a long time ago.

I don't always like you. I love you a ton. There's a huge difference. Willing to walk with people through all the messiness that we are, to not be so easily offended all the time, to set aside our own preferences for the sake of others' preferences, to have hard conversations when you feel offended by something that somebody says.

It's difficult work to walk with people throughout the entirety of your life. And we shouldn't cut and run on one another when things get uncomfortable.

Charles Spurgeon once said, this is in your bulletin, quote, the day we find the perfect church, it becomes imperfect the moment we join it. End quote. The people of a church are not a commodity for your consumption.

You shouldn't show up, prospective church, join the church, expecting this group of people is there in order for you to be served with all of your stuff. The leadership of a church is not a commodity for consumption.

[32 : 11] If you are here, even if you have yet to join the church, if you are here, if you come to this spot and join us on Sunday morning for any period of time, I want you to hear this with such clarity.

I love you. I'm not particularly a people person. I have a very limited capacity and energy to really know people. The Lord has put me in a position where I am desperate for him to work beyond my natural gifting.

I will tell you that he puts a love in me for you. You just show up. Show up a couple Sundays in a row and I want to serve you. And I want to serve your family.

I want to lead you in the truth. I want to see you grow in your affections for our God, grow in holiness, serve sacrificially for your eternal joy.

I want to do all of that. Every man that serves as a pastor here feels the exact same way. We lament together over departures.

[33 : 13] It is hard for all of us when someone leaves the church. Don't be a consumer. The congregation as a whole, us as individuals, it's not good for you.

It's not good for us. If I have held your babies and made them laugh, don't ghost me. I love you.

So, for what relational reason might you leave a church? So, I have not given you any reason. I have said, I have given you any reasons to do, I think, I think this, when it makes a lot of sense, when your connections throughout the week with other Christians, those you are serving and those that serve you, those Christians just all happen to be part of another healthy church.

It just starts to make sense that all of the relational connections that you have are happening someplace else on Sunday mornings, that it really might make a lot of sense for you to walk more closely with those people than those that you covenanted with.

I intended to read it all, but for the sake of time, I'm going to skip over reading our covenant to you. It's there in the bulletin. Church members, these are the commitments that we've made to one another, each of us, to everyone.

[34 : 43] Perspective members, these are the commitments that we make to each other, and we would make to you, should you join our church. Thirdly, briefly, the church is missional.

The church is missional. Matthew 28, verse 18-20, Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. I have all the authority, so go.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

The church is at the center of the Great Commission. Baptizing, it's an ordinance of the church, teaching the observation of all things. This is discipleship happening in the life of a church.

And it is empowered by Christ. He has all the authority and he is with us to the very end of the age. The mission of the church necessitates going.

[35 : 51] All of us are going. We're here right now, but after this we're going to go. In our going, we're to make disciples of all nations. we're to be about this as Christian people and as a local church gathered.

And praise God that he sends people from this local church to other places in order to expand his kingdom. So God may send you elsewhere because of work.

It could be that you're being led to another place because of a job, an opportunity that you would consider taking up and joining another church in that place. God may send you elsewhere for particular ministry work.

We've got Matthew Carnegie, a member of our church in Texas right now at language school preparing himself to go and do translation work. And Ms. Wimke, who's back from the same school and is getting ready to go do Bible translation work.

Chandler and Hannah Girton, preparing now. These are people we're going to say goodbye to, who are going to depart from our congregation to go and do important gospel work.

[37 : 10] Lots of kinds of going. We leave this place to gather again, and then we go back out again to gather, I hope, more people who need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It doesn't have to happen in a foreign context. Not just that way, there may be a local church that needs your service.

Just a couple of years ago, a handful of families, I think it was five, to a church in Gillsville that needed some help. They needed some people to come along and walk with them.

They're doing well, a good service in that place. We are kingdom people. We're not just trying to build our kingdom. We want to see God work through us to build His kingdom.

So there's a chance that God may lead you some other place, but go to serve, not to be served. I hear too many of those.

[38 : 14] I'm looking for something. You guys don't have it. I think they do. And what I can tell you with confidence, confidence, if you function the life of a church with a fear of missing out mantra, you will definitely miss out on what the church can offer you.

If you're always bouncing to the next thing because you think it's going to be the thing that's going to give you the feels that you hope to have, you will never have deep relationship on mission with God's people.

So, I hope that frames it up for you just a bit. When? Now, how? I've mentioned a few things, but let me flip the entire definition, words, on its head.

How to leave a church? Let me say this. Don't. Instead, be sent by your church to another church.

If you are a part of a healthy church, and we pray and we labor for this to be such a church, to work with and walk with people in this kind of way, if you're part of a healthy church, then that church will gladly send you for good reasons, to help you think and discern, is God leading you to another place?

[39 : 41] And if he is, then we will gladly send you to that place. don't leave, be sent. Walk that process out with a group of people who love you dearly for your good and for the glory of our great God.

Let's pray together.