

For the Love of the Family Ministries

Missionaries to America's Forgotten Mission Field, the Family

When Is It Right To Leave A Church?

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When Is It Right To Leave A Church?

Let me say at the start of this article I recognize this is a sensitive subject. However, I want to address the issue because we receive contact from many people who are struggling with issues in their local church. In many instances the issues they are struggling with are affecting their home, marriage, and their children's spiritual life.

I have been a pastor for more than 30 years and have pastored more than one church. Because of the ministry of For The Love Of The Family I have had the opportunity to counsel with many pastors and their families who have been hurt and many destroyed in the local church.

I have also counseled with families who have had their families destroyed by the sin of the leadership in the local church. So, I recognize this is a very sensitive issue. We do

not live in a perfect world; in fact we live in a world of sin. The whole creation groans because of sin, Romans 8:22.

First of all, let me say I am a supporter of the local church. I believe God's program today on this earth is a spiritually sound, doctrinally sound, spirit-controlled leadership, Bible teaching and preaching, and practically sound independent-fundamental Baptist Church. However, there is a wide swath today in independent-fundamental Baptist churches. Folks, let's just be honest, many independent-fundamental Baptist churches today are not a good place for a spiritual person to try to rear their family spiritually. Depending on whose statistics you look at and how they were taken, 60 to 80 percent of all children in these churches do not go on to serve the Lord after the age of 18. That is serious failure.

I am in the ministry because God called me to help people get saved, learn, grow, and have an intimate, personal, passionate relationship with God. To have a real relationship with Him and to not have a mechanical one that leads to destruction. ***Whoso despiseth the word (does not give proper attention to) shall be destroyed: but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded.*** Proverbs 13:13.

All around us today we see spiritual destruction of the lives of people in the church. Honestly, some of that comes because of bad spiritual leadership in the church and some by disobedience to God and His Word by people in the church.

Let me say, while I am a supporter of the local church, I am not a supporter of a church that has sin in their leadership or in their assembly that the church is not willing to deal with. The apostle Paul addressed the issue to the Corinthian church of their unwillingness to deal with their sin. They were a carnal church led by their emotions and their lusts. Romans 6:12-13, ***Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.*** *Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but **yield (submit)** yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.* I would suggest reading and meditating on Romans 6:11-19. Ladies and gentlemen sometimes in a church sin has to be dealt with. Sometimes sin has to be dealt with in the leadership of a church. God will not bless a church that does not do so. It will affect the lives of the people negatively if it is not dealt with.

I have heard and seen horror stories of churches out of control and lives being destroyed because of an dealt with sin of the leaders of the church and the people in the pew. When this happens we get a local church that has all the sins of Ephesians 4:31, *Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you with all malice.* The church becomes a place of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour (public quarreling), evil speaking, and malice (a desire to hurt). There is nothing godly about any of that and it sure will hurt the family that wants to live for God. The church becomes a place of anger and fighting, a literal “mad” house.

While I was in Bible College my wife and I were on our way home to Indiana from Tennessee. We stopped at a local church of a friend to enjoy the services with them. The pastor had invited us to dinner after the service. He said, “We have a short business meeting for a small issue after the service. You can stay if you like.” The next thing I knew the “short business meeting” turned into a brawl. After the small item of business someone wanted to make a motion from the floor that we vote on removing the pastor. People starting yelling at each other and one guy jumped up on the back pew and threw a song book at another man! I told my wife let’s get out of here before this gets any worse!

The history of that church has been one of bickering, fighting, and they have had a string of pastors down through the years. Many of those men quit the ministry after being the pastor of that church! Many Christian’s vowed to never go to church again because of the bickering, fighting, and out of control behavior in that church. What a sad testimony! Many people’s lives were destroyed because of non Spirit-controlled behavior. Remember Galatians 5:15, *But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.* Galatians 6:7-8, *Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*

Dr. David Cloud in his excellent article “I Am Not Your Pastor” www.wayoflife.org says:

I DO NOT SUPPORT THOSE WHO SEPARATE FROM ALL CHURCHES TODAY.

“Let me make this very clear: I do not support those who separate themselves from all churches today. While I believe that God’s people must be discerning and cautious and not overlook error, at the same time we are to be patient and faithful to God’s ordained institution, the church, and to God-ordained pastoral authority, and I believe we should strive as much as possible for unity and not disunity among true believers. Both things are

emphasized in Scripture, though it is not always a simple matter to obey both of them at any one time and place.

In some cases there might not be a sound, spiritually-healthy, Bible-believing church within commuting distance, and I would not expect God's people to attend a church that would undermine their faith or hinder their spiritual lives or that of their children.

But my recommendation in such cases has always been to find a way either to help start a good church in that particular location or to move to a place where there is one. It has been said that "where there is a will there is a way," and that is usually true. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). When God tells us to do something, He provides a way, and the church is God's program for this age. It is mentioned more than 100 times in Scripture. Most of the New Testament is written to churches. We are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:25) and to obey them that have the rule over us (Heb. 13:17). Those Scriptures take for granted that we will be in a church. The first believers continued steadfastly in the doctrine, fellowship, prayers, and breaking of bread in the church (Acts 2:42). Paul commended Phebe to the church at Rome, and reminded them that she was a servant of the church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1). That is the example that is put before us in Scripture. Folks, sheep need sheepfolds and shepherds, and that is what God has provided in the church.

BE WISE AND CAUTIOUS AND PATIENT IN DEALING WITH PROBLEMS AND ERRORS IN CHURCHES.

It is not your duty to stir up trouble on every issue in the church. However, sometimes trouble is godly. There are churches that urgently need some of the members to step up the plate and try to bring godly change. In no way do I want to discourage the hearts of God's people who are trying to stand uncompromisingly for truth and righteousness in this evil generation, but there is a right way to do things."

Folks we need to work from the top down. One man who wrote to Brother David Cloud said, "Many people are I'm right; you're wrong. One can be right and not be righteous about it and thus make of none effect the desired change. This one talks to that one and causes a division prior to the matter getting to the pastor. Now he has a compounded problem with division in the church. We need to work from the top down with humility and grace, knowing that it takes time to change the course of a ship. With the strong medicine we need to also teach the tact to administer it so that it gives the greatest benefit and least harm. Hopefully we won't look back and say, 'The operation was a success; we cut out all the cancer; too bad the patient died'! We just need it at the right dosages to be the most effective."

Bro. Cloud goes on, "There is no simple one-two-three list of suggestions I could give that would solve the problem of how to correct errors in churches. It is never easy, and it is

largely a matter of spiritual maturity and attaining and applying godly wisdom under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Paul said to the church at Rome: “And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14).

Thus, to be able to admonish others in a fruitful manner requires that we be filled with goodness and filled with knowledge. It requires a spirit-controlled person. This refers to spiritual maturity and a solid foundation of Bible knowledge. If I try to “straighten out a church” without these two things, I will not only fail, I will cause more harm than good.

New Christians, in particular, must be very cautious about trying to exhort others, especially their spiritual leaders. New Christians are often very zealous, and I don’t want to dampen that zeal, but zeal must be tempered with godly wisdom and new believers simply don’t have much of that. They are called babes in Christ in God’s Word, and they are exhorted to drink milk and grow to maturity (1 Pet. 2:2). That is what a babe in Christ needs to focus his attention on, rather than trying to straighten out other people!

Again, I want to emphasize that I am not trying to discourage God’s people who are trying to take a stand against error in a godly manner. I know many people who have tried to do this in the right manner and they were wrongly branded as trouble-makers and treated with a great lack of respect by the pastors and churches in question. It is never an easy matter to challenge the church leaders, and it is a sad fact that leaders who have chosen a path of error or sin rarely turn back from it.

There is a great problem among fundamental Baptist and fundamentalist Bible churches today, in that so many that were once sound are moving in the direction of New Evangelicalism and the contemporary church growth philosophies. They are bringing in the modern Bibles and modern music and modern dress standards. They are allowing women to lead in ways the Bible forbids. They are creating worldly youth ministries that pamper and entertain the flesh rather than challenge the young people to true biblical discipleship. When God’s people rise up against these things, more often than not they are despised and discarded.

So please do not misunderstand what I am trying to say in this article. I DO NOT want to discourage or hinder God’s people in taking a scriptural and wise stand for truth in this wicked day. I am just trying to urge wisdom.

IT IS SCRIPTURAL AND RIGHT TO QUESTION ONE’S PASTOR ABOUT ISSUES IN THE CHURCH, BUT THERE IS ALSO A RIGHT WAY TO DO IT.

If the pastor won’t listen and doesn’t want to be challenged about things, and if he requires “unquestioning loyalty,” I would strongly suggest that you leave that church. Such a man is a Diotrefes, and staying in that church will cripple your spiritual life and turn you into something like a cult member.

If, on the other hand, you have godly, humble pastor(s) who are qualified by God's standards and open to challenges from their people, be very patient with them. You must always remember that you are not the pastor. He, not you, will be held accountable for the church before God. He, not you, has to bear the burden of the ministry, and I can assure you that there is probably not a more difficult job in the world than leading a church and dealing with PEOPLE! He, not you, has the call of God to make the major decisions about the church's ministry."

Some people have asked me, Pastor Coomer, "How do I handle dealing with people or situations?" I counsel people to understand the scriptural way to handle issues. First of all in a submissive spirit, I need to ask God if this is my problem. If it is then I need to confess my sin and repent of it. If God says it is not my problem, then I need to ask God if I need to speak about this problem. God may say yes or no here. If He says yes, then I need to "speak the truth in love", Ephesians 4:15. The more truth I speak the more love I need to use. It is not always necessary for you to speak, **but whatever you do you must ask God about it first.** Do not open mouth and insert foot without engaging brain and being Spirit controlled!

One suggestion I would make is this: it is important that we not just criticize what is in place in the church, but that we have a positive plan for something better. We may need to share it as an idea with the pastor. It will then give him the opportunity to explain his thinking as to why this is being done the way it is. It may very well be you do not understand or have been told something incorrect about it. Proverbs 18:13, *He that judgeth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.* Obviously, there is a lot of folly and shame going on today.

Bro. Cloud says, "I advise that you always give pastors the benefit of the doubt. Not every issue that comes up in the church is as black and white as we might think. God gives pastors wisdom. They know and understand the overall picture in a way that you do not. At the same time, pastors are just sinners saved (hopefully) by grace. They are learning and growing like the rest of God's people. God lets us make mistakes to teach us lessons; shouldn't we give the same freedom to pastors to some wise degree? I am not talking here about clear biblical error and heresy or the type of sin that calls for church discipline. I am talking about things like being too "patient" with new converts about cleaning up their lives, and not dealing with issues as much as I think he should, and bringing in preachers that I don't like, and having or not having a youth ministry, and assigning people to jobs that I don't think they should be assigned to, and not having the soul winning program exactly to my suiting etc.

A qualification for the pastor is that he not be self-willed (Titus 1:7). This means that he is to rule the church by God's will and not his own will, by God's Word not by his own thinking. **The self-willed man wants to run over other people and control them. It is a matter of the heart's attitude. It is a matter of pride and lack of compassion and godly patience.**

At the same time, the church members also should not be self-willed. If God has not called me to be a pastor, I should not try to rule the church! I am not saying that the church member should not have complete liberty to express his opinion about things. I am not saying that the church is not a body and that each member should not be treated with godly consideration. I am simply saying that the church member needs to check himself and make sure that he is not trying to be something in the church that God has not called him to be.

"For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Romans 12:3).

Women must be doubly careful about this matter, because God's Word forbids them to teach or to usurp authority over the man (1 Timothy 2:12). The woman might be more spiritual than the men and might know more, but God has not given her the liberty to teach men. She thus has to be patient and submissive and be a great prayer warrior in order to move the heart of God to intervene THROUGH THE MEN when there are errors and problems.

This does not mean that a woman cannot go to her pastor and other church leaders if she has questions and issues, but she simply is not allowed by God to become their teacher. She can recommend materials so that the men can learn from other men, if they are willing to look into the issue, but she cannot become their teacher.

What I am trying to say here, is to be very wise and godly and patient in dealing with church leaders.

"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another. This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:14-16).

God has given pastors authority (Heb. 13:7, 17). Some of them have abused their authority, but pastoral authority is God-ordained, nonetheless. Not everyone in the church has the same authority. This does not mean that we overlook things that we believe are wrong. Pastors are not popes and do not have unlimited authority; their authority is limited by the Bible; and churches must not follow pastors into error. But as a church member, I must always remember that the pastor has authority that I do not have and that he, not me, will give an answer to God for pastoral decisions.

THERE IS A TIME TO LEAVE A CHURCH WHEN IT IS COMMITTED TO A PATH OF SERIOUS ERROR OR SIN, BUT THERE IS ALSO A RIGHT WAY TO LEAVE.

There is a proper time to leave a church, if it is not following God's Word, but there is a proper way to leave and many times people leave churches for carnal reasons and in a carnal manner.

If someone leaves a church for biblical and spiritual reasons, the fruit will be characterized by the description in James 3:17-18--purity, peaceableness, gentleness, easy to be entreated, mercy, without partiality, without hypocrisy. Someone leaving in this mode will speak the

truth in love. He leaves because he is convinced it is God's will, but he does so in a peaceable and godly manner. He is respectful of the leaders even if he doesn't agree with them, and he harbors no ill will toward them.

But if someone leaves a church for carnal reasons the fruit will be characterized by the description in James 3:14-16--bitterness, envy, strife, confusion, and other evil works. This is not of God! Many times I have observed this. People get upset at something and they leave a church, but they do not do so in a godly manner. They cause all sorts of trouble and try to hurt the church, both before they leave and after. Many times they won't even talk about the matter with the leaders in a gracious, open manner. They are not "easy to be entreated." All of the love they once had for the church and its leaders disappears. They deal deceitfully. They go behind the pastor's back and despise his position.

I realize that compromised Christians can be quite vicious and can tell lies about men and women who try to correct error. They have told lies about me countless times, but we must be careful that we do not give occasion to the flesh and fight error in an unspiritual and unwise manner.

If you have to leave a church, do so in a godly manner and leave a good testimony "as much as lieth in you."

And if you feel that you have to leave and join another church, join a better one. It makes no sense when people claim they are leaving a church because of error or sin, but then they join a worse church!

The apostle Paul said, "Follow me as I also follow Christ," and we can and should say that; but we must also acknowledge that we are not apostles today. The only infallible authority is the Scriptures. **There is no infallible preacher."**

One man wrote me and said, Pastor Coomer, "Sadly, many times when a person leaves a church for sound reason, they are immediately called wicked, vile, ungodly etc. by the pastor and leadership. Some pastors are so out of control with being "Lords over God's heritage" that they try to destroy anyone who leaves." Unfortunately that is true sometimes. On the other side the same goes for people who leave who try to destroy their pastor. Some try to destroy their pastor without leaving.

Let's just be honest folks, there can be problems on both sides of that fence. Loyalty to a sinful church is wrong, I Thessalonians 3:6, 14. **Blind loyalty to a church with out accountability is a dangerous thing, and is spiritually unwise.**

What if a church is so out of control, there is lying, deceiving, continual fighting, gossiping, an angry spirit, dishonesty among the leaders, financial impropriety, or unrepentant immorality that is not willing to be dealt with? Then it is time to go.

I heard from a person awhile back who was involved in such a church. Now folks, I would always tell a person to talk with their pastor first. My first question is always have you discussed this with your pastor? If not, I would encourage them to do so. However, sometimes a person needs to understand how to talk with their pastor.

In this instance the fighting in the church was out of control. The pastor had such an anger issue no one could talk to him. He exploded at anyone who questioned his authority or anything in the church for that matter. **He demanded blind loyalty to him and the church. No one needs to be sitting under this type of ministry.** I would suggest all pastors read Ephesians 4:29-32 in regard to their anger. You may say, "God was angry at sin". Yes, but you are not God! So don't think you are God. No one had seen a financial statement in this church for many years. People left the church in droves because of the anger issues, financial issues, fighting and carnality issues and a boat load of other issues. Of course, anyone who left was wicked, vile, and ungodly. Folks, as a pastor you can only sell that for so long until people finally realize NOT EVERYBODY WHO LEAVES IS UNGODLY. There is a reason and probably several reasons. When someone left they were talked about and e-mails were sent out about them and the propaganda machine went into gear. Finally, the pastor left and of course, left the church in chaos. However, he had taught people well about how you deal with others. Lie, deceive, cheat, gossip, and say whatever you want without any facts and run a campaign against them. Backbiting, lying, and gossip were the order of the day. Remember Galatians 5:15, "But if bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another."

Of course, if the preacher got a hint that someone was questioning anything he then preached about them from the pulpit in anger. While I am for strong preaching, we are to "Preach the Word" to people not in anger at people. Moses got into real problems with God because of his anger with people. **James 1:20, "For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God"**. We are to preach in the power of God not in anger because we are mad or suspect someone of not having blind loyalty to our ministry. There are some people who are so brainwashed, that they are in total denial to sin in a church or in church leadership and let it go on for years. They have been taught loyalty to the pastor and a sinful church no matter what. God encourages loyalty, but not blind non thinking loyalty. Our loyalty is to God and His Word.

Down through the years, many lives had been destroyed and Christians disillusioned by the angry leadership, the bad treatment of people, and the constant fighting and division in this

church. The man's children and family were being destroyed spiritually and emotionally by the constant fighting and carnality issues every Sunday. Why would anyone want to stay in a church like that?

After counseling with other pastors and time alone with God he decided he would leave the church. Of course, he was called wicked, vile, and ungodly in their eyes. He tried to leave peaceably but was immediately talked and written about in a manner to try to destroy or cast dispersions on his character. That is a sad church in total denial concerning their sin and unfortunately it is what many churches are about today.

Someone says, "Pastor Coomer have you ever had anyone leave your church?" Yes, of course and it hurt me every time. When people lie about me I don't appreciate that and some people do that when they leave. Others try to deceive as to why they left. In my opinion, as a pastor sometimes our church is better off when a person leaves, because the lack of submission in their life to God and authority causes us to have to deal with their sin. If a person has left and created havoc in leaving we need to deal with that. Generally, when someone has left our church they looked for a weaker church on standards, music, Bible etc. Sometimes a person just did not like me. (I really can't understand that! I cannot understand why anyone would not like me!) Sometimes we have had to exercise church discipline on those who have unconfessed and unrepentant sin in their life. A church is commanded to do so, Matthew 18:15-18 although many do not.

Folks, God wants your church experience to be one where you can grow spiritually, learn, worship with traditional godly music, where people are treated with kindness, Ephesians 4:32. It must be a place that preaches God's Word from the correct Bible in the power of the Holy Spirit, is concerned about the lost and tries to win them to Christ, and wants to disciple and help people. It is a place that teaches people how to deal with their sin and how to help families have a real, intimate, personal, passionate relationship with God. It should be a place that is a family that cares about each other not an entertainment center. Families that are controlled by the Spirit learn how to deal with problems in the church in a right manner. All families need to learn how to deal with problems rather than fight over them.

When problems are so far out of control and sin is in the camp and no one wishes to deal with it then it is time to go on to another church that will be what is needed in your life. Loyalty to a sinful church demanded by pastors who are "lords" is not Biblical and it is not Christ honoring. Your family deserves more than that for God. In fact, the spiritual health of you family depends on it. Always make sure if you do leave the church it is for the right Biblical reasons, done in the right way, led by God, for the godly peace of your family, and a Biblically correct worship opportunity for your family.

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