

Leaving the Church

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What is the church? Do certain rituals define it, or specific words painted on the sign in the yard? Is the church defined by parameters agreed upon by men, based on their understanding of scripture? Or is it determined by Jesus' recipe, where two or more are gathered *in His name*, He is in their midst? Some will argue that it can't be a church until they gather together to take the Lord's Supper, sing songs, have an opening and closing prayer, etc. They assert that a recipe or formula must exist, wherein a rigid structure is put in place before we can rightly call church "church." Consequently, if a person chafes against what certain men have determined, and challenge the status quo, they are seen as divisive. They're not part of the Team.

Thanks to the "Westernization" of the Christian church, many think church only exists when they are together as a group. Once they finish up on Sunday morning, the church goes into some limbo land. Is a human family only a family when they are gathered around the dinner table? When Dad leaves for work when the children go off to school, and mom does what moms do, are they not still a family? The Prodigal Son was still a son even while he slopped hogs in a distant land. So when we speak of someone "leaving" the church, our perception of what defines "church" is skewed by prejudices and paradigms installed by men from prior generations.

The New Testament (NT) treats division or factions as inevitable occurrences (1 Cor 11:19), and may well be part of the pruning process described by Jesus in John 15.

Those bearing the title 'Christians' are among the most thin-skinned, easily offended people on the planet. Like the tares growing up with the wheat (Matt 13:24), they blow from here to there, always seeking a place to settle down but eventually leaving over something they don't like or agree with. A genuine child of God, however, works in harmony with the body. (1 Cor 12:25) Slightings and perceived insults roll off their back like water from a duck. Sanctification has done its work; they don't seem to get upset. Rifts in the church are seen as minor setbacks. They've seen it all before.

Many refuse to go to "church." They've popularized the excuse, "I don't wanna go to church with all them hypocrites," thus identifying themselves as 'true' believers. Sunday morning, in their opinion, is not for wasting time with a bunch of phonies. As former unsaved sinners, we can relate. We used to see church folks as those who dressed up, put on insipid smiles, and thought themselves better than the rest of us. If the truth be known, what goes on inside some churches can be downright ugly.

A friend of mine sent me an e-mail from an Air Force chaplain, parts of which I've pasted here:

Is there a group of people who will love one another no matter what and keep on going together for God? That's the vision God has given to us—to love, forbear with, and forgive each other, growing together in Christ year after year. As you would expect, it takes a lot of sweat and tears. Eager to maintain means I am willing to work hard at unity—no matter what it costs me. This kind of sacrifice isn't about

money or time, it drills down to the core of who you are. The strength behind this pledge is in the sacrifice of yourself. (See Rom 12:1-2) Your opinions, your entitlements, your injured feelings—these are what you give up for the sake of unity. This is how far you will go to “do life” with your brother and sister in Christ. Always caring, always trying to work it out, always helping. Why, because you like the person? Not always. You do it because you want to honor God. (Anonymous)

This begs the question, however. Is such an environment normal for God’s people? Where does the NT say that enforced fellowship with people who dislike one another honors God?

We know that we have passed out of death into life, **because we love the brethren.** (emphasis mine) He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:14-16)

The context of what the Holy Spirit means is found in the next two verses:

Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

I’m aware of at least two events where the brotherly love notion was put to the test. The details of these events are hazy, so you’ll have to fill in the blanks. One involves a preacher who drove to a small town in West Texas that had a small church. (There was a time when West Texas had more churches than rattlesnakes.) This preacher’s motives have been lost in memory as I write this, relieving me of the temptation to embellish the story. Perhaps he was disillusioned with mainstream Christianity; I don’t remember. At any rate, the man donned scruffy-looking clothes and a 3-day beard, posing as an unemployed itinerant looking for work. At each house or small business, he would ask to perform menial labor for a few dollars. Sometimes he would ask for a cold drink. He was unsuccessful with the former, but a few did grant him a drink and a few moments of commiseration before sending him on his way. For the most part, however, he was received with suspicion and distrust. Kids were brought into the house and curtains were closed.

After several days of low-level begging for work so as not to arouse the local law’s interest, the man drove to the church in his expensive car to attend Sunday morning services. He was clean-shaven and wore an expensive suit. A deacon pumped his hand, the preacher greeted him like a long-lost brother, and the congregation, in general, met him with smiles and handshakes.

None of them recognized him.

At the end of the service, he took the invitation call. Standing before the congregation, he asked the members if he looked familiar to any of them. A few puzzling looks and frowns. He then described what he had been doing for the past several days. As realization slowly crept over the 30-odd members of the congregation, smiles began to fade, and eyes registered the full spectrum of human emotion. More than a few looked at wrist watches and to the exit, wishing to escape the worsening embarrassment. I’m sure the preacher must have heard the last section of Matthew

25 thundering in his ears. As a result, this church closed its doors, and the building was sold to another denomination.

I use this story to illustrate a point: here was a congregation where *everyone* quit going to church. While I'm sure that each member had personal reasons for not attending again, the group as a whole saw the blatant hypocrisy amidst their ranks and chose to distance themselves from the stain of guilt.

Taking that experience, can a person disassociate himself or herself from church, based on what they see as patently wrong? We've probably known Christians who just seem to be looking for a reason to either switch churches or leave altogether.

I gave this lots of thought while driving home one day with my oldest son. I made a comment about his driving, to which he replied, "If you don't like it, *you* can drive." Since I know and love my son, I shrugged it off. If I had said the same thing to a Christian brother or sister, they would have been offended, and probably left the church. Meetings would have been called. This begs the question: *how much love is really between Christians if every time someone says something off-color, they quit speaking to one another?*

I once offended a lady when I politely suggested that her favorite radio preacher was a false teacher. Although I was polite and told her that this radio preacher helped get me to Christ, she removed herself from Christian fellowship because of what I said. She vowed never again to attend services where she and I could share the same air. If the truth be known, she was a sporadic attendee. When she did show up, she seemed uncomfortable and kept aloof from others. She had been looking for an excuse to quit going and found one in me.

Through a series of events, these folks find themselves in the church but are never quite happy there. They have a wait-and-see attitude. I'm not sure what they're waiting for, but it's evident in their lack of commitment. Attendance is sporadic; they never contribute to the bible study; they don't hang around and chit chat afterward. Eventually, some minor infraction jabs them in the eye and they can't get away fast enough. Later, when you see them at Wal-Mart, they seem happier than they've been in years. They can finally be self-justified. Reconciliation is nearly impossible since they don't want to be there anyway.

Legalism

We must not forget about legalism as a reason for leaving the church. Too much of it can cause dis-fellowship, and not having *any* rules can make people leave. I've known of entire churches closing shop over legalism. Although legalism plagued the early Christians, they never divided over it. Dividing a church today is as simple as changing the color of the building—someone is going to be offended and leave in a huff.

I asked my adult students one day in bible study the reason they attended services. Most of the class replied they felt they *had* to because of the admonition in Hebrews 10:25 not to forsake the assembly. Many Christians see this as the 11th Commandment: *Thou shalt not forsake the assembling of yourselves together*. The entire thrust of Hebrews has nothing to do with Sunday

morning worship but involves a trend where Jews were leaving the Christian faith and returning to their Mosaic traditions to avoid persecution. The writer's mention of "not forsaking the assembly" addressed more than just skipping church to attend a soccer game. This legalistic mentality distorts the space between the opening and closing prayer. Once they've complied with the "5 authorized acts of worship," many Christians resume a cozy relationship with the world.

For example, a woman once walked out of a service because I played a CD where scripture was being read over very soft synthesizer chords. Here was a weak Christian, raised in a legalistic church where the used of musical instruments is seen as an unforgivable sin. The fact that she listened to worldly music had no bearing on what she did during the "magic hour" of worship.

People have left over issues concerning the Lord's Supper, the word formula used in baptisms, elders or the lack thereof, use of a baptismal versus running water, how money was being spent, whether or not the four gospels were Old or New Testament, splitting up bible classes, allowing children's worship separate from the adults, *ad nauseum*. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, they scrupulously "tithe mint and dill and cummin," (Matt 23:23) yet in their personal lives, maintain a loose relationship with the world.

Jim Jonas points out in his article, [A History of the Church of Christ](#),

...feuding churches often reconciled, although sometimes peace was restored only with the passing of a generation, giving rise to the adage that most church squabbles were solved by funerals. (Harrell, *History*, p. 41, 44).

Again,

...it seems that the more time preachers had on hand to write and promulgate their views, the more trivial many issues became. (p. 11)

Today, legalism is becoming less of a concern, with the older generation being replaced by younger, more "open-minded" preachers and their followers. Let us pray that the pendulum doesn't swing too far to the right.

Not Carrying Your Weight

The NT speaks of love and hate among brethren. Jesus, however, typically referred to hate as coming from those who opposed Him and His ministry. Hate is primarily world-centered.

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:20-21)

Shortly after being baptized in the church of Christ at 23-years-old, I suddenly found myself unemployed. Construction work where I lived had come to a near standstill. With a wife and son to feed, I soon found myself asking for help from the church.

At first, there was genuine concern among the brotherhood. As time went by, however, brotherly concern gave way to blunt demands: “Are you even *looking* for a job?” “*Where?*” Some told me to apply for jobs I wasn’t qualified for. “Just have a positive attitude, and they’ll hire you.” That sounded positive and pro-active (especially from men who had secure employment), but a boss looking to hire a carpenter needs more than a smile and a handshake.

During this time, the “prosperity gospel” was becoming popular, and even good preachers were being swept into the myth of the “word of faith” ministry.¹ An elder told me, “If a Christian is struggling financially, there’s something wrong; God is not blessing him.”

My status as “brother Terry” degenerated into suspicion, and my motives for coming to services were interrogated. I finally decided to join the Air Force. Even then, some in the church had issues with this, saying I was killing people by joining the military. Shortly afterward, this congregation shriveled up and died.

The sad thing is, those who are the focus of such scrutiny end up leaving. They are squeezed out of the church much like a herd of animals that will chase off one of their own that has a defect. The church then sees their departure as “proof” of the person’s wrongdoing.

Tickle My Ears!

There are those who look for something in a church service that can satisfy some innate urge. If a church can’t satisfy their “itch,” they will move on. Sit in any bible study or worship service for a time, and you’ll see people come and go. This is called “church shopping,” and is why denominations exist. There’s a church out there that will cater to any need.

The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim 4:3, 4)

What are they looking for? What turned them off? The preacher’s style may not be appealing, or the music may turn them away. Specifically, however, Paul is referring to certain *teachings* that appeal to the flesh, not the aesthetics of the sanctuary lighting.

Certain brands of Mormonism offer multiple marriages, calling to the sinful mind. The opportunity at becoming a god after death, to be worshipped by your progeny, is attractive to megalomaniacs. Some sects of Mormonism are breeding grounds for child molestation. To the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups, getting to the throne without going through the cross appeals to many. To those looking for an “experience,” the charismatic movement offers church services charged with emotion, loud music and little else. Services aimed specifically at young

¹ Joel Olsteen and Joyce Meyers are two currently popular ministers of the Word of Faith doctrine. It mainly teaches that if you believe hard enough for long enough, your dreams and desires will find fulfillment. It treats Christianity as a way to prosperity and God the Father as Santa Claus. It changes the focus of Christianity away from Jesus Christ and aims it at YOU.

people gear their music, message, and atmosphere on what's trendy. If you don't like to be held accountable and prefer to place your faith in rituals instead of Christ, Catholicism is your ticket.

There's a church for every kind of personality to satisfy whatever tickles your ears. While Christianity seeks to change a person's heart, denominations and cults exist to satisfy whatever sinful urge currently exists in the heart. You don't have to change anything—they've got what you've been looking for. As Solomon said, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Prov 14:12)

Dark Halls of Worship

So what about the Christian who may have a legitimate reason for leaving a congregation? Notice I didn't say *leave the church*. A person is put in Christ at baptism; they don't "leave" the body of Christ, although quitting attendance at the local body is seen by many as such. Their attitude is that you should stick with it, no matter how painful or unbearable it gets.

When Jesus told the Ephesian church He would remove their light if they didn't repent, what did He mean? The sin of the Ephesian church (Rev 2:1ff) was that they had "forgotten their first love." They had forgotten Christ. Their mission and motives were Christ-less. So it was within this environment that their light would be removed. Since *light* is a metaphor for truth (God's word—Psa 119:105; 2 Cor 4:6), Jesus implied that *whoever was carrying the truth in that congregation would be separated out*.

Yet would this not be the worst time to leave the church? When things have gotten to the point where a congregation has lost its way and strayed into error, it seems that staying would be more beneficial to the body rather than giving up and leaving.

The purpose of the church is to build up one another in the most holy faith. (Jude 20) I have trouble finding a scripture that says "Christians gather together to worship God." Jesus said, "An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24)

Notice that Jesus didn't say the true worshipers would congregate in a specific place at specific times. While that may be the case, it is not the imperative. The essential thing is that they worship God in spirit and truth. Restricting worship to a 2-hour block on Sunday morning is patently ridiculous and flies in the face of what Jesus said. If a congregation's purpose is not causing "the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love," (Eph 4:16) they can't rightly call themselves the church of Christ.

The group inclines to blame the *individual*, whatever the reason(s). The *group* can't be wrong; it has to be the *individual* because *they* are not worshipping with *them*. The over-riding goal (in the congregation's mind) is that worship must be held in compliance in a certain building at a particular time, doing specific rituals. Failure to abide by these artificial parameters is therefore sinful.

To repeat, “going to church” is nowhere cited as worship to God. To which some brethren have told me, “Everything you do, even if it’s mowing the church lawn, is worship.” Really?

As a group, the Corinthians thought they were right and Paul, the lone individual, was wrong. As a group, the Jewish nation thought they were right when Jesus stood alone before Pilate. How could everyone be wrong and one person be the only one right? He was bucking the system, rocking the boat, upsetting the established religious system, and calling them names. Jesus never earned a pedigree from the local college; never completed the “rite of passage” they had determined. He just didn’t fit their paradigm as a king.

They were wrong. Like the Corinthians, an entire congregation can be wrong, as were five churches in Asia Minor, all in danger of being eliminated if they didn’t repent. (Revelation 2 & 3) They were spiritually dead wrong. The letter to the Corinthians and Galatians reveal congregations that were on the ropes due to misconduct and apostasy. In these, as in the Revelation churches, humanism, apathy, and false doctrine were responsible. To assume today’s congregations are above error is obvious nonsense, seeing how many opposing denominations exist in the first place.

Paul told the Corinthians, “I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.” (1 Cor 4:14) Warn them against what? Arrogant men were seeking disciples to follow after them. The followers who were falling for these men perpetrated division, much like fans of a particular sports team. Paul was being denounced as weak; a blow-hard with no real power. This was the *group* mentality, and Paul virtually stood alone. Referencing the general admonition of scripture against pride and arrogance, he writes,

“Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? (1 Cor 4:6-7)

In truth, Paul never “left” the church—*they* rejected *him*. Following mortal men was the Corinthian’s sin, which led to other sins. Even Jesus’ disciples weren’t safe from their own self-interests, jostling for position and leadership roles. This is not to limit the importance of leadership, but that responsibility lies with Spirit-filled elders, not The Pastor. Advertising the preacher’s name on a church sign, newsletter, website, book, or anything else connected to the bride of Christ is indicative of placing a man above everyone else. Most do it unwittingly, merely following in the footsteps of what the other churches do.

The Laodicean church made Jesus sick. (Rev 3:16) Why? Because of their inaccurate self-perceptions. This group *thought* they were in good spiritual shape. The fact of the matter was, they were apathetic. How many churches in our society think God smiles down on them when in fact they are as spiritually dead as a cemetery in the middle of winter.

Many *believe* that they’re doing the Lord’s work, yet are not. (Matt 7:21) Dr. J. Vernon McGee once said, “A lot of churches are as busy as termites and just as destructive.” If a church is trying to win converts through pool parties and social events, they are not preaching the gospel of salvation via the blood of Christ.

Pot-lucks incite more interest than Bible study. While no Christian would dare be late for work, they don't think God cares if they wander in late for a bible study, if at all. After all, the ten o'clock bible study isn't part of the "5 acts of worship," so it's safe to blow it off. In the end, "forsaking the assembly" has been finely honed and delineated by today's scribes and Pharisees.

It would do well to hear Jesus' words as to what makes up the church:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

Certain acts, specific times, or buildings do not identify the church. Jesus said that those born of the Spirit were not readily visible. Like the wind, you can only see the effects.

Summary

While there is no NT precedent for "leaving" the church, it does appear that "there must be divisions, so that those who are approved may become evident among you." (1 Cor 11:19) Who are the approved? The one leaving or the one staying behind? Is there a pruning process taking place to which Jesus referred in John 15?

I didn't write this to promote leaving the church. However, circumstances may get to a point where one's absence may benefit everyone involved. A person can only beat their head against the wall for so long. Eventually, self-preservation takes over, and a need for moving on wins us over. When I left my church, I used the time of absence to pray, losing many nights sleep wondering if I were the one to blame.

I would suggest that the Spirit of God moves within the body of Christ and that if we humble ourselves, that body—the church—can take on the attributes Christ desires, those of being spotless and blameless. (2 Pet 3:14) This sifting and pruning process takes place on earth, where death finally adds a child of God to the heavenly kingdom for all of eternity.

Membership is not to be found in church attendance records but in the Lamb's Book of Life. Paul told the Romans, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him (i.e., they're not part of the church). If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness." (Rom 8:9-10) The Holy Spirit in a person is *the* criteria God uses to determine who are His and who are not His. The Spirit and the fruits thereof are the proof of a child of God.

Attending church services is merely the icing on the cake.

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