

6 Wrong Ways to Leave a Church

My friend “Stewart” (not his real name) is one of the friendliest pastors I know—and his wife is also an exemplary leader. But a few years ago, they began getting emails from an anonymous church member. The messages were severely critical and laced with threats. Then a small package arrived at the church. It was filled with a white powder.

Stewart called the police to be on the safe side—and the powder turned out to be yeast. The pastor and his wife learned firsthand that the ominous messages and the package came from a former member who was upset. The person’s odd behavior proved that some Christians don’t act like Christians when they decide to leave a church.

Many of my pastor friends have similar stories of people who leave churches in dramatic and inappropriate ways. They all recognize that this is one of the most serious occupational hazards of ministry. Pastors are going to feel rejected when people leave, even when God is leading those people to make an exit. But if you are directed by the Holy Spirit to leave a church, please do it the right way.

1. Don’t leave mad. If you are leaving because you are angry at the pastor or another member, you are proving your immaturity. Offense is never a reason to leave a church. Jesus told us to go to the person who offends us (Matt. 18:15). And Proverbs 19:11 says: “The discretion of a man defers his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” If you break a relationship every time you are offended, you will never grow up. Even if you are called to leave a church, you should never hold a grudge. Have the courage to face your offense and disarm it.

2. Don't leave and make threats. Some people get so angry, they want to hurt the church when they leave. They want the pastor to suffer. One man told a pastor I know that he hoped the church would go bankrupt after he stopped tithing to it. (Instead, God sent other people whose donations more than covered the lost income!) Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves." Even if the pastor or church members are doing inappropriate things, it is not your job to punish them.

3. Don't leave secretly. When I was a boy, my mother taught me to say: "I enjoyed my meal. May I be excused?" when I finished eating. I was not allowed to leave the table without this announcement. A similar rule applies to leaving a church. It's rude to walk out with no explanation. Your pastor deserves to know why. You can write a letter, but it's better to say it in person—and to include some words of thanks for the way the church has helped you in the past.

4. Don't leave and talk about it on social media. Proverbs 6:19 says God hates the one who "sows discord among brethren." Those are strong words! Some people actually think they are doing God's work by badmouthing a pastor, but they are digging a ditch that they will soon fall into. Keep your judgments to yourself. Posting the details of your rant on Facebook only shows how petty and self-centered you are.

5. Don't leave and try to take others with you. If God is calling you to switch churches, that's fine. God will bless your transition if you do it in a healthy way. But if you try to stage a massive walkout, you are undermining God's authority. Don't allow the enemy to use you as an agent of division.

6. Don't leave and stay away from church altogether. I have often heard people say they feel God is leading them to leave a church to go elsewhere. But then I find out, after three years, that "elsewhere" really meant "nowhere." They quit church altogether! This is usually a sign of either deep

disappointment or an unresolved conflict. You should never, ever give up on church. It is God's family. No Christian should live in isolation.

Obviously there are times when we must leave a church. It happens because of job transfers, family issues, ministry preferences, driving distance and many other reasons. And some churches have unresolved problems that make them unhealthy—and God does not necessarily require us to stay there. The Holy Spirit is the one who directs us to the right congregation.

Good pastors know they cannot hold onto people in a possessive way. Healthy churches remind people that the exit door is unlocked, and that members are free to go as the Holy Spirit leads. Deuteronomy 28:6 says: "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out." Pastors should bless people who leave—but members should leave in a respectful way that invites that blessing.