

A Message to Church Hoppers: Can You Handle the Truth?

A significant number of people are switching churches and/or discarding relationships. I've found that judging instead of loving often plays a role as seen in a recent correspondence, "I continue to move from church to church. I can't seem to find a place where I fit. I'm beginning to wonder if I'm the problem!" This is an honest question that deserves a closer look. Here are a few points to consider before leaving a church or discarding fellowship:

*Do the leaders, and the pastors, view the Scriptures as inerrant—the final authority? This is stating the obvious, but it's worth stating: if pastors, teachers, or preachers challenge the authority or authenticity of the Word of God, they should step away from leadership. I'm not referring to differences over non-essential issues; I'm referring to those who disregard the clear commands of Scripture.

Read Jeremiah 23 to gain a sense of God's thoughts toward leaders who lead the people astray. If the leadership is not solid in this area, there are biblical grounds to fellowship elsewhere.

Some may ask, but what if the pastor is no longer studying and his teaching reflects it? Or, what if the church is leaning toward legalism or compromise? These are clearly points of prayer. Pray specifically that hearts are changed. Spirit-led teaching is vitally important to spiritual growth, and legalism and compromise drain spiritual life from the church.

*Is God's Spirit truly leading you to leave? Psalm 32:8 declares, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye."

God guides those who are willing to follow (cf. John 7:17). If

God seems distant, Bible study boring, and church irrelevant, or if legalism, judgmentalism, and dead formalism are setting in, it may be that the work of the Holy Spirit is being suppressed. More change will be seen outwardly as the Holy Spirit is given more power to rule inwardly.

The conviction of the Holy Spirit is a true gift from God. Sadly, many people ignore it, yet they say that God is leading them to do this or that. But all too often, they find that they made a very poor decision. What happened?

The Holy Spirit didn't lead them—human nature, pride, and emotions probably did. For instance, we all know people, perhaps ourselves, who mistakenly jumped into a dating relationship or marriage, spent money frivolously, moved, or left a church believing that God's Spirit was leading.

I'm amazed at the number of people who don't have a servant's heart, who don't read the Word, who don't spend time in prayer, who don't display humility, and yet think the Spirit is leading them. Let me be clear: God directs us to make "wise" decisions that correspond with His Word. Disobedience leads to disappointment.

*How will leaving affect the local body of believers? Leaving a church can have social ramifications. Friendships often end when someone leaves. When this happens, new believers and others are frequently baffled and confused. As a result, they start asking questions. Depending on whom they ask, the church's reputation may be damaged by gossip. We should consider how leaving will affect others, and, when possible, leave on good terms without gossiping or criticizing the leadership.

This can be difficult in challenging situations because we want people to know why we left. Our sinful tendency is to pull others down. We may think that somehow this makes us look better. If we are truly concerned about the body of Christ, we

will hold our tongue. Self-righteousness has no place here. But I'm not referring to sweeping corruption and deception in the church under the rug. Wisdom is needed here.

*How will leaving affect your family? Most often, the actions of the husband determine the stability of the family. If a company fails, the president is held responsible. If a team fails, the coach is held responsible. If the spiritual health of the family is deteriorating, the father—well, you get the picture.

Granted, there are men who, through no fault of their own, experience failure in their home, but for the large majority, there is a critical need for spiritual leadership. Our country is in desperate need of this. It's generally the wife who encourages Bible study, church attendance, and prayer, while men willingly forsake their God-ordained role as spiritual leaders. There is no greater investment than investing in your spiritual growth and in the spiritual growth and health of your family.

If the family isn't growing at church, or if it doesn't seem to be the best environment, then fathers (or single parents) need to ask some hard questions: What can I do to nurture their growth? Is this partly my fault? What am I modeling at home? However, if the church is not contributing to the spiritual health of our family, we may have biblical grounds to leave.

*Do you have a consumer mentality? Another comment most have heard is, "I'm just not being fed at church!" On occasion, this is very valid, but it deserves a closer look. For example, if someone isn't growing from food, but others are, it may not be the food or the chef, so to speak. I've noticed that many leave because they are not promoted, or allowed to start a ministry, or because they don't feel appreciated. If we're guilty, we need to replace our "consumer" mentality with a "servant" mentality.

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