



“When Should I Leave a Church?”

Kevin Presley

I am sometimes approached by people who are greatly troubled by what is going on in their home church. They are very disillusioned with the direction the church is going, perhaps saying that the church is spiritually dead or that there are sins prevalent in that church that they simply feel they cannot tolerate. Sometimes people begin to see scriptural problems with the church where they worship, but they really don't know how they should react or what they should do about it.

That begs the question: is there a time, in the eyes of God, when I should leave a local church? I want to consider with you some of the principles of scripture that I think will help us to make that determination. Let's begin by looking at Jesus' words to the seven churches of Asia Minor, particularly to the church at Sardis.

Revelation 3:1-4 “And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”

Obviously, here is a church that was fraught with a number of problems. We know they were serious problems because **verse 4** tells us that there were a few *even in Sardis* who were innocent in regard to those sins. They had not *defiled their garments*. So, where did that leave them in their relationship to the remainder of that local church? Where does that put a person today who may be in a congregation where unscriptural things are practiced or where things are not what we would have them to be? Is it ever appropriate, and if so when should I leave a local church? When should I change congregations?

This is admittedly a rather difficult and sensitive subject. We should approach it very carefully and circumspectly for several reasons. First of all, I don't want to minimize the importance of being a part of a local church. To the contrary, membership in the local church is not only good, but necessary. That is God's plan. When we are baptized into Christ, we are added to the universal body of Christ, the church of Jesus Christ (**Acts 2:47**). Then we are to be part of a local congregation of that church, which is the visible, organized manifestation of the church in this world. So, I can't be faithful to God and serve the Lord acceptably without being a faithful, active, involved part of a local body of believers, and worshipping and working within the confines of the local church. That runs contrary to what many preach and believe today, but it is what the Bible teaches about the Christian's relationship to the church. I do not want to minimize the importance and necessity of that.

Secondly, many are very flippant and careless when it comes to their relationship to a local church and I don't want to encourage that either. Some change churches about like they change shoes, you might say 'church shopping' like they do for businesses that peddle various products. Always looking for the latest, greatest, cutting edge trends in religion. As a result, churches today are trying to market themselves to people based on all the various benefits, attractions and ministries that they offer, hoping that people will pick them as a local church. I don't want to encourage that mindset. Our choice of a local body of believers with which to be joined together is not only a very important choice, but it is an eternal choice. It is a matter that boils down to what the Bible teaches—not just what I want or prefer.

On the flip side of that, some are to the other extreme, to the point of being not only careless with the church, but careless with their souls. Regardless of whatever error may persist or what sin or digression may be being practiced, they wouldn't think of leaving that church because of family ties, friendships, long-lasting personal or family traditions, community or business ties. Some are unfortunately spiritually or even intellectually lazy, not willing to investigate the scriptures and honestly compare what the Bible says to the beliefs and practices of the church that they call home. They are just content to be part of that certain religious body for whatever reason, and scriptural considerations are very minimal, if they exist at all.

Believe me, I understand. I really do understand the emotional and sentimental ties that bind a person to a particular religious tradition or group of people. It is very hard to stand up against friends and loved ones who may be in error. It is incredibly difficult to leave what we have been comfortable with for perhaps our entire lives, for something that represents a total change in spiritual direction and philosophy. I know it's a struggle that is very real, perhaps even in your heart today. I hear concern from many of our audience over the direction that their church is going. It distresses you to see what is happening in the church that you have loved and long been part of. It is so hard to make a decision that will have such a long-lasting and radical impact on your life and the lives of others. Thus, we need to approach this question very carefully from a Bible standpoint.

The third reason we have to be so careful is that the Bible doesn't explicitly address the notion of leaving a congregation of the Lord's church and becoming part of another congregation. It certainly addresses the need to leave false religion and to embrace Christianity, but what about the church that claims to be the Lord Jesus Christ's church, but is betraying that claim by its doctrine and its practice? What are we to do? We may not have explicit examples of what others did in ancient times if similar circumstances arose, but the Bible does give us ample principles to deduce what is right and appropriate and pleasing to the Lord.

Let me hasten to say that there is no such thing as a “perfect congregation.” Some people are always in search of the perfect church. Any flaw in any member of any church becomes an excuse for them to leave and go somewhere else. I am not suggesting that at all. In fact, the seven churches of Asia are identified as having some major problems (**Revelation 2 & 3**). Most of those congregations were strongly rebuked by Jesus for one reason or another, and were in danger of losing their candlesticks if they didn’t turn around and repent. You will notice if you read through those seven letters that the goal of Jesus’ rebuke was repentance and reform.

Our goal should be the same. Our first hope should be to reform a wayward church. Unfortunately, many will not be reformed. That is the sad reality. Much of the change that we see in the Lord’s church today and in religion in general is the result of a very slow, methodical and calculated agenda being carried out by what you might call ‘change agents.’ That is not easily countered or reversed. In many cases, those changes have been subtly creeping in for a long, long time now and carrying people along with them, and it is hard to row against that tide. Our hope should be to bring a wayward church back into the pathway of right and duty. To ask for the old paths and for people to gladly say, *we will follow in those paths*. But, as we noted recently in **Jeremiah 6:16-17**, that was not the reply of the ancient Israelites.

Jeremiah 6:16-17 “Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein. Also I set watchmen over you, saying, Hearken to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not hearken.”

You are going to find a great resistance. Many will not be reformed, unfortunately. It is possible to be in a congregation where members are personally weak, where problems exist in that church, but where you can still acceptably live for the Lord. **Revelation 3:4** illustrates that, as we noticed.

Revelation 3:4 “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”

So, whatever the problems were in Sardis, there were members of the church there who remained unstained; they were not participating in the wrong themselves. Paul wrote to the Roman brethren to *forbear* with one another in matters of individual Christian liberties (**Romans 14**). There are areas of personal discretion, of liberty as Paul describes them, and in those areas, we are to be patient and tolerant and forbearing one with another. But offering to God false worship is NOT a liberty. Doctrines that pertain to our salvation and doing the will of God in truth are not things under consideration in **Romans 14** when Paul was discussing the regulation of Christian liberties.

What about a situation where a person cannot remain without defiling their spiritual garments? What about a congregation where things are being practiced that merely by my participation in that congregation, I cannot remain unspotted? It is possible to become partakers of other men’s sins. This is written concerning the sins of Babylon:

Revelation 18:4 “And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”

And Paul wrote this to the church at Ephesus:

Ephesians 5:11 “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.”

You see, the Bible teaches that fellowship with others in Christ is found in a mutual fellowship with God through Christ, and is thus contingent on truth. John ties all of that together for us.

I John 1:6-7 “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

You can't be in fellowship with God and live in sin and remain and persist unrepentantly in error. Ultimately, fellowship with one another is based upon our relationship with Jesus Christ, which has to do with believing and abiding in the doctrine of Christ, the truth of God's word. Let's consider some situations where you may need to seriously consider leaving a local congregation. In fact, with many of these things I'm going to describe you NEED to leave if that congregation will not repent and be what the Lord wants it to be.

First, if your church boldly embraces evil, what the Bible calls wickedness, and refuses to repent, then you are in the wrong place. Sadly, sometimes that is the case. Members who unrepentantly live in sin and immorality are to be withdrawn from and disciplined, the Bible says. Not welcomed or applauded. If your church is embracing what God has called wickedness or abomination, you don't belong there if they will not repent and get back on the right road. We see much of that in the religious world today, unfortunately.

Secondly, if your church is part of a denomination, you need to get out of that situation. I say that very plainly because denominations are foreign to the word of God. You will not find the idea of denominations within the model of the New Testament church, particularly in the book of **Acts** and throughout the epistles. Jesus told His disciples that He would build “*My church*” (**Matthew 16:18**). We're told in **Ephesians 4:4** that there is “*One body*.” God's ideal and His expectation for that body is found in **I Corinthians 1:10**.

I Corinthians 1:10 “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Everything that Paul said there runs completely counter to the whole idea of sectarianism and denominationalism. By definition, the church is only spoken of in the New Testament *universally* and *locally*. In other words, the word *church* can refer to ALL the saved people who have ever lived upon the face of the earth, who now have a redeemed relationship with God through Jesus Christ. OR the church is spoken of in the local sense, where it becomes a literal, organized entity or congregation. Those are the only two instances to which the church is referred. Anything that is in between is foreign to the Bible. A denomination is not the universal church because every denomination claims that there are saved people in other denominations. Neither is a denomination the local church because many local churches make up a denomination. Therefore, a denomination is something that is foreign to the teachings of the Bible. Denominations were created by men and founded on varied and conflicting creeds, dogmas and conventions that were convened and devised by men instead of using the scriptures as their creed. If you are part of a denomination, you are not in a congregation of the Lord's church and

you need to leave that system. You need to seek out the church that Jesus established using the New Testament as the standard of measurement.

Thirdly, if I cannot worship and serve God acceptably within a local church, I need to leave that church. Many aspects of my life as a Christian are inseparably tied to the corporate church. For example, take public worship. The church comes together to offer worship unto God and we're told in **Hebrews 10:25** not to forsake that. We're told in **Acts 20:7** that the disciples in Troas *came together to break bread*. Paul told the Corinthian brethren this:

I Corinthians 11:18" For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it."

Paul also speaks of the church coming together for edification.

I Corinthians 14:26 "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."

So, the church is to *come together* to participate in these matters of worship and edification. You can take your Bible and begin all the way back in the book of **Genesis** after man left the garden, and see that worship began to be offered by man to His Creator, and **NEVER** in all of that time has the manner of worship been left up to the worshipper. In fact, Jesus said this regarding the manner of worship:

John 4:24 "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

Even some churches of Christ today are beginning to depart from that principle and ideal. Some of them are beginning to entertain the idea of introducing instrumental music into the worship. If you respect the authority of the New Testament and the silence of the scriptures as a member of Christ's church, you cannot go along with that. You can't participate in that, as it is an unscriptural innovation.

We will see more and more women filling the pulpits of churches that once did not allow such because of Paul's teaching in **I Corinthians 14:36**. You are going to see women ordained as preachers and elders and placed in roles of leadership that the New Testament reserves for men. You will see more of that because it has swept over the denominational world, and we are now seeing it encroach upon the Lord's church. The trend is in the wrong direction, not the scriptural direction.

Some churches of Christ are trending toward a contemporary worship, in the sense of this new emotion, experience-driven encounter that is replacing simple worship in Spirit and in truth and the patterns and inspired traditions of the apostolic church. Therefore, if a church is not worshipping according to the scripture, I as a participant in that worship **CANNOT** worship in an unscriptural manner. If a church does not worship as the Bible teaches, I can't participate in that worship and remain unspotted myself.

Fourthly, if sound doctrine is not taught, I need to think about my relationship to that church. Granted, there will always be disagreements about various issues, but as for anything that is germane to my salvation and the salvation of others, there **MUST** be unity. We mentioned **Romans 14** and Paul's discussion about liberties a moment ago. There are misunderstandings that Christians have about certain teachings of scripture and when the Bible doesn't legislate regarding those things, liberty exists. But on the other hand, there are requirements spelled out in God's word, commands that are given,

examples that are laid out for us to follow. So, in those areas that are germane to my obedience to God and my salvation, we must strive for unity in those things. Some churches today are drifting from the very core message of the gospel. Many preachers deny that obedience is a necessary part of the gospel, despite what the Hebrew writer said.

Hebrews 5:9 “And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;”

We’re being told, even in some pulpits of the Lord’s church, that we’ve really misunderstood and baptism is not as important as we once believed. Peter said something different.

Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”

We learn later in the book of **Acts** that sins are not washed away until one is baptized, as Saul was told by Ananias so long ago.

Acts 22:16 “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

There are doctrines such as *eternal security* and *salvation by grace and faith alone* today. You hear many doctrines taught about grace that exploit and cheapen the grace of God, as Jude spoke about.

Jude 4 “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Friend, these are serious matters. I need to be concerned about what’s coming from the pulpit in the congregation where I attend. As we recently discussed, churches are changing today. I know that disturbs many of you and you don’t know what to do or where to turn. Have you been left behind by all of the change and upheaval? Do you feel like a stranger perhaps where you have worshipped for years? Do you feel like a hostage to change agents and those who are executing an agenda to transform the Lord’s church into a denomination? I want you to know there is an alternative. There are still people who ask for the old paths (**Jeremiah 6:16**). They are still trying to follow closely the examples and commands of the Lord and His apostles—not only in daily life, but in the work and worship of the church. If you’d like to investigate that further, I hope you’ll reach out today.

©2017 BibleWay Media. All rights reserved.
BibleWay Media grants permission to copy this material for personal use. Permission is also granted to distribute this transcript as long as it is reproduced in its entirety, used solely for its original purpose of spreading the gospel, and attribution is given to the author and Let the Bible Speak.