

Leaving Well

For Christ's Sake...Leave Well

Don't Go Away Mad, Just Go

I have a responsibility. I must inform, in fact warn, the members who choose to stay! If I don't warn them, speak "truth," and let them know how poorly the church is run, that the pastor seems to work more on his "putting" than on his preaching, that I am the only one who gives real leadership to this church, that I once heard the music minister swear, or that I have come across some confidential, albeit second-hand, information, that leads me to believe they are trying to make the church "contemporary", I will not have fulfilled my service. Yep, even though I feel that I am following God's call to another place of service after eight years. I must get this information out. Otherwise, the church may not survive.

Now that they are in print form, these comments seem juvenile (to put it kindly), and they are rarely owned in public settings. Still this is a mentality that is often expressed by clergy and congregants once they decide to leave their church.

What is wrong with this kind of mindset? What is wrong with informing those who stay about the shortcomings of the church and its leadership while you are walking out the proverbial door? Well, besides it being sinful, unscriptural, and ultimately harmful to others, it is a disservice to the very God they claim to serve and to the church for which Christ died.

So, is it possible to leave well? If so, what action *is* appropriate? Does one have a responsibility to warn others of the church's errors? To fix things?

I believe Scripture teaches about leaving well and will guide us in this. Therefore, I am using Scripture, experience, and promptings to build a framework which clergy and congregants can work within once they have determined it is best to leave a church. I hope you will consider investing the time, prayer, and discipline in the five areas I outline. Specifically, 1) stop citing God for your pettiness, 2) lose any delusions of grandeur, 3) be willing to take the road less traveled...the high road, 4) finish well, and 5) for clergy...watch your language... writing a resignation letter, Apostle Paul style.

This is a plea from a brother in Christ and a fellow minister in the Jesus-created and loved local church.

Leaving well can be done, but it is tricky. It begins with answering this often-asked question from church member Harry or Sally, who both seem to reside in each church in America. They will say, "I know your resignation letter said the appropriate things for the whole church to hear, but I am sure there are other things involved. You can tell me. What's *really* going on?" This is asked in subtle ways, in darkened church

hallways, and in small groups. The words and circumstances may change, but the intent of the question remains the same. Your answer to that question determines whether or not you will "leave well."

I am writing under the assumption this framework is only used once the decision to leave the local church has been determined. However you get there...burning bush, termination, having the color of the carpet changed without your permission, being reassigned by the governing board of your denomination, long and tedious business meetings, prayerful conversations or the still small voice of God...this is between you and God. There has been much written about how to go about discerning God's will; but once you have made a decision, there is a great deal of work remaining to ensure your leaving in a way that is reflective of Jesus.

For Both Clergy and Congregants

Stop citing God for your pettiness.

Waren Wiersbe, in his writing *In Praise of Plodders*, wrote, "To go or not to go.....Any decision of this nature is always painful, but the pain need not be permanent or damaging." (Wiersbe 49) How does it so often become permanent and damaging? Sin. Mostly the sin of pride. But sins such as lying, gossiping, and anger make a pretty good recipe. And even worse, I have witnessed far too many conversations that triangulated God. People transpose their petty reasons for leaving the church onto God and His will for them.

When discussing your reasons for leaving the church, stop citing God when it is really your pettiness. That is dishonoring to God. Don't call it God's guidance for you to move when it is more a lack of God's guidance in your life or a lack of God's presence in your decisions. If you have not reconciled your desire to leave with God's will, at least be honest....."We do not believe we can faithfully serve here any longer. We have not heard a crystal clear direction from God, but we feel we cannot serve Him and this church well in the near future; so we must pull away until we learn differently." At least that is honest.

One, three, five, or even ten years of effective ministry at a church can be undone by one loose comment or one evidence of lack of integrity as you walk out the double white doors.

"Well, I am leaving, so I am exonerated from reconciling with those parties who have caused this pain. Right?" Well, this is not so if you want to follow Scripture, which would lead to a belief in a ministry of reconciliation. II Corinthians 5 is our best guide in this area. In a recent sermon, Pastor Dan Yeary (North Phoenix Baptist Church) said, "We are compelled by the love of Jesus Christ to reconcile to one another." Jesus first expressed this idea, that believers must be right with each other before worshipping (see Matthew 5). I believe the teaching still applies even if you no longer worship within the same room.

It is not *your* church, *your* ministry, *your* people. It is the church of Jesus Christ, and Hades and no out-going clergy or congregant can stand against it.

Lose your delusions of grandeur

"The church can't survive without me. Don't they know that when I leave the church they will fail miserably? Don't they know the money I give is significant? Don't they know no one else knows how to run the programs like I do?" Don't the people who are asking these types of questions know our faith is exemplified by people leaving and other Christians picking up the slack and moving forward? An omniscient God allows for this. Jesus himself set the example. He was leaving and His mission should have failed miserably, but it didn't because God's work is bigger than individuals. Because of our faith, our churches are bigger than any one person or even influential groups of people. Many other powerful church leaders have left a church, and yet the ministries they left behind are still thriving. Still the example of Jesus should stand out above these earthly leaders.

O.S. Hawkins, in his book *Good News for Great Days*, wrote: "Whatever we do as we leave a church, we should never seek to maneuver nor orchestrate nor manipulate nor promote what we leave behind." (Hawkins, 15) And further, we should not wish or orchestrate the demise of a program simply because we will no longer be in charge of it. In order to avoid this, we must get over ourselves. God's church will somehow maneuver through the gaping hole we leave behind (Read with sarcasm). And do you know what? If our leadership vacancy cannot be picked up and led well after we are gone, in most cases it is more a reflection of our poor leadership than it is of the people remaining at our former place of service.

Be willing to take the road less traveled.....the high road.

In his book *Axiom*, Bill Hybels recounts the process he took when leaving his first ministry position. He felt compelled to begin a new ministry, which meant leaving a church that had become sluggish and frustrating to him. In preparing his resignation letter to be read to the church, he wrote a stinging account of his frustrations and intended to place blame where he believed it belonged. Thankfully, a wise man in his church asked him what he was planning to say and then counseled him that he thought he was making a mistake. Bill says the next statement from the advisor has resonated with him ever since..."Take the high road. Bless what you can bless. Thank everyone you can thank. Cheer on what is appropriate to cheer on. And be done with it." (Hybels 195)

I believe this to be good advice. But does taking the high road make you feel as if you are the only one with tires capable of traveling here because everyone else seems to be on the road below? A friend and fellow minister often is convinced that no one really takes the high road. Still we both agree that we must do our part; we know that is what God expects from us...even if we seem to be blazing the trail up there on the high road.

Finish Well

Finishing well involves appropriate good-byes, appropriate communication, and appropriate timing. It means that you must be trustworthy and only speak about your leaving to those who need to know and who are equally trustworthy. Can you and can they keep a confidence?

Finishing well is seeing through what you have committed to even if that takes additional time. Hopefully, your acts of service, whether paid or volunteer, were not for men but in response to God's calling. Thus, leaving without a transition plan in place only hurts the church. Sometimes when leaving a church, sooner is better. But that is true only if you can come to an agreement with leadership about what needs to take place before you leave. If you are clergy, this means some specific meetings in which you cooperate with leadership to come to the best solution for the church. If you are a volunteer, you should serve until a backup plan can come to fruition.

Another part of finishing well is knowing when your work is really done. I have experienced countless clergy and congregants leaving the church and trying to "fix" everything on their way out. Ironically, they often expend more effort in "fixing" things in their leaving than they ever did when they were "staying." Finishing responsibilities is different from subversively correcting others and their programs. Do not adopt the mentality of one who feels it is his/her responsibility to save the church from the harms of reckless and incompetent leadership. This biased and anger-fueled response is a mentality that often leads to such foolish actions as sending emails to church membership outlining why you are leaving and what they should do to "straighten the ship" if they are going to stay. Such actions become a slippery slope and are sinful. Even if your intentions are righteous, they are likely to cause discord and further alienate you from the leadership remaining with the church. Your decision to leave a church is most often yours; but, once this is determined by you (or the church), you need to go with out fulfilling a need to go out in a blaze of glory, like Maverick in *Top Gun* or, more spiritually speaking, like Martin Luther and his door nailing. Unless you think your actions will define modern Christianity, steer clear of this sort of action.

If you are a Christ-follower, ask God to show you how to leave His church well. He will guide you. There are some grey areas and, in those, I believe an honest attempt to determine how God would have you handle it will lead you in the right direction.

For Clergy

Watch your language...writing a resignation letter, Apostle Paul style

Paul was a forward-thinking man, so realizing the average tenure of a minister would be three years in the 21st century; he gave us an example of leaving through the book of Ephesians. O.S. Hawkins outlines what is Paul's resignation letter from Acts 20. These verses give us a place to aim. Listen to the language: "I served with all humility, many tears, and trials...I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed repentance toward

God and faith toward our Lord, Jesus Christ." (Vv. 18-21)

And do you know when this letter was written? When Paul had no other choice. He *had* to leave...he was "bound" in the Spirit. The Greek word picture for "bound" is that of a prisoner's chains or grave clothes for the deceased. The Spirit compelled Paul and he could do no other. It was God's choice for him to leave and he was "wrapped" and "bound" by the Almighty's desire.

When a person is determined to leave well, it is most often an extension of someone who stayed well. Paul did all he could. When you serve diligently and in the power of God, your church will know when to release you. The church will know it is about God rather than about you and them. In Acts 13: 3ff, the Ephesian church sent Paul out---literally meaning to thrust out, to push out. It was not that they could not stand the apostle; it was that they knew he was following God's desire. The church also recognized his calling and released him to do the work of ministry. That is leaving well. When both parties realize it is a God-ordained move, they will be supportive of getting the person and the church to the next place in their respective ministries.

This writing is ultimately a plea on behalf of the church for ministers and members to leave well. Moreover, it is really about this writer determining his own scriptural framework that will be non-negotiable when God calls him to leave a church. I am confident that God does not need my writing or suggestions to "save" His church from "reckless leaving," but I also know that many people never fully realize what damage they are doing to the church they love. I also realize our inclination toward leaving poorly comes from a root sin, pride. "I want to be noticed and appreciated." "I want to be missed." "I want to leave a gap." "I have been hurt, so I must make sure they hurt too." This shows that another reason for leaving poorly can also be revenge. Often those leaving have been so integral to a ministry that it is hard for them to imagine how anything could exist without them. Often, their identity is tied to their role as a church member or church clergy rather than to their identity in Jesus. It is all about pride. It may look different in each situation, but ultimately it requires laying down our pride.

Clergy will always go to other churches; congregants will always move to other churches. The grass will always look greener over there. So, what can you and I do?

We can choose to leave well. Our impact at our "former" church should not be measured by the chaos that we leave behind. There are no spiritual medals awarded for causing the biggest "wake" at our former place of service. We have to determine that our leaving will cause the least amount of disruption. Better yet, what if our leaving can glorify God?