



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

LEAVING A  
COMMUNITY  
CHURCH WELL:  
PARTING  
WITHOUT PAIN



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## LEAVING A COMMUNITY CHURCH WELL



# INTRODUCTION

To leave a church well, it is vital to understand what a church is to begin with. If a church was just a building or an organization, for example, then there would be little need for a life skill guide like this. Leaving would be simple—just say goodbye and go on your way! But as we look to what the Bible says about the church, we can see that these earthly congregations are far more than religious institutions. The way we participate in God's redemptive work on earth is, in large part, through a local community church.

The local church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) and God's new and living temple (Eph. 2:19-22). When the church in the Bible gathers, Christ himself is present among them (Matt. 18:20). And to persecute a church's members is to persecute Christ himself (Acts 9:4). Needless to say, then, leaving a church often feels more like leaving a spiritual family than leaving a voluntary religious group—and it should. The stakes are high. Heaven and earth are watching.

And yet, at times, it is right—and maybe even important—to leave a church. In Scripture, we also see that churches can lose their first love (Rev. 2:4). Their leaders and teachers can abandon the gospel, and when they do, they should be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9). Maybe an egregious sin like sexual abuse has been committed against you or a loved one, and staying would eat away at your dignity and keep you in harm's way. Not to mention, at times, some believers may need to part ways due to conflicts they cannot resolve, such as the sharp disagreement that drove a wedge between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41). There are certainly valid Biblical reasons to leave a church.

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But by changing churches, we are, for better or worse, changing the nature of our relationship with each of our fellow church members. How might leaving your church impact some of the closest friendships you have there? Bible verses about relationships remind us of the weight of these bonds. Are there any other doctrinally sound, healthy congregations nearby that you could join? What challenges might you face as a member of those churches? Then, on top of all these complicating factors is the most complicating factor of all: our own hearts. Why do we want to leave? Are our reasons truly honorable?

Each of these factors must be considered and carefully weighed in order to leave a church well, in a way that truly honors the Lord and builds up his people here on earth. That is the aim of this life skill guide. In what follows, we will divide the process into four parts. First, we will look at our hearts to ensure that we have a clear conscience before the Lord. Next, we will clarify our primary reason(s) so we can determine the appropriate steps to leave a church well. Then, we will cover how to communicate our decision. And finally, we will start developing a clearer expectation for how our relationships will (and should) change once we have left.

Leaving a church is almost always very difficult and complicated. But praise God, he is also faithful. He is not just the God of your church, but all of them. And he has called us into the Christian fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). Therefore, this God can be trusted to guide us through this challenging process of church transition, and even to shape us into the image of Christ along the way. Let's get started.

# 1

## INSPECTING YOUR HEART

We need to start with people who want to leave their church *but shouldn't*. There are three sinful heart postures to beware of, which may be prompting you to leave your church even though you should not. Even if you do end up leaving, to whatever extent these heart issues are present in your life, it's important to both own and repent of them. Until you do, it will be very difficult to heal and/or avoid the challenges at your next church.

**1. Unforgiveness** | Are you bitter towards a leader or fellow member?

Usually, when we consider leaving a church, hurt feelings are involved. We have been wronged, disappointed, or neglected by others in ways that have changed our relationship with them. This relational dissonance can be so intense that we feel a strong pull to “get away” from those who have hurt us. In some cases, that may be necessary—especially if there is ongoing unrepentant sin involved. If you find yourself in this position, understanding what the Bible says about fellowship can provide clarity. But it may also be the case that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible, and it is our own bitterness that is standing in the way of it. Understanding these signs it's time to leave your church versus when to stay for reconciliation is part of a healthy church hurt recovery.

Paul calls us to something better: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:8). For the sake of your own spiritual health, it will be critical for you to forgive those who hurt you. Bitterness is a toxin to the soul that must be exposed and rooted out at all costs. This is a difficult but necessary part of when to leave a church with a clean heart.

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Remember, we are called to bear with and forgive our fellow church members (Col. 3:13). It is a glory to overlook an offense; that is not something to be ashamed of (Prov. 19:11). Costly forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel. God easily could have been consumed with anger towards us, but instead, he chose to forgive us “while we were yet sinners” (Rom. 5:8). Could this situation be an opportunity for you to put the power of the gospel on display by extending grace and forgiveness, even when it is costly for you? If Christ’s death and resurrection are powerful enough to save us from the eternal judgment we deserve, then they are certainly powerful enough to bring peace to incredibly complicated relationships within the church. Even if you are leaving a church after years, these Scriptures for leaving a church with grace remain your anchor.

### **2. Pride** | Are you thinking of yourself more highly than you ought?

It is entirely possible that we have been wronged—genuinely wronged—and your heart be tainted with pride. Both can be true. When this is the case, it is tempting to overlook our pride because of the wrongs committed against us. For example, we might think, “Who wouldn’t be gripped by a proud defensiveness when they’re so mistreated, as I have been?” While that impulse is understandable, it is certainly not the way of wisdom. Wisdom will require us to treat the other person’s sin like a speck in their eye while treating our sin like a log in our own (Matt. 7:1-5). Have you truly been operating as if, however big their sins may be, yours are bigger? Or have you been preoccupied with the weakness and sins of a fellow believer without ever pausing to consider your own?

Maybe you’re angry that you have been overlooked for a leadership role that you feel most qualified for. Maybe you feel belittled or dismissed by someone who keeps correcting you in small group. Maybe you are struggling to respect a much younger and less experienced pastor who has made some missteps. These are difficult experiences, but when our hearts are weighed down by pride, they can become completely unbearable to us. Pride can tempt us to leave in order to make a public statement of disapproval. We want everyone to know: we think this is wrong! Resist that impulse. It does not honor Christ and his Church, and it will not bear good spiritual fruit in your life either. People often ask, “is it a sin to leave a church?”, but the sin often lies in the prideful motivation

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rather than the departure itself. If you embrace this pride and reorganize your spiritual life as a result of it, it will only continue to eat away at your soul while finding a new church to join. A healthy church transition requires an honest assessment of these internal motives.

### **3. Avoidance** | Are you running from commitment or accountability?

Has someone tried to identify a sin in your life that you vehemently deny, or disagree with their assessment of? Is your patience running thin while you wait for a particular change to be made? Are you truly just leaving this church, or are you running from the Church altogether? Whatever the case may be, our sinful hearts are inclined to run when things get hard. While hitting “reset” and starting fresh may seem easier and more desirable, that alone should not give us the freedom and peace to do it. Sometimes the God-honoring path is neither easy nor desirable. It may be that you are face-to-face with a difficult season ahead—church discipline, a cumbersome reconciliation process, dashed hopes or expectations—but the right thing to do is to stay and endure these hardships by faith.

Before you decide to avoid the hard road that lies before you at this church, consider the long-suffering faithfulness of Jesus toward sinners like us. He could have easily run when things got painful or costly for him. But if he had, then we would have no hope of salvation. Instead, “for the joy set before him he endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). In the same way, truly following Jesus will always lead us to a cross as well—whether at this church, or another one. Do not run from accountability. Do not run from every painful or costly experience just because they are hard. Embrace these burdens by faith! Keep repenting; keep believing; keep enduring. This is the way of Christ. Learning how to leave a church properly requires this level of spiritual maturity. If you find that staying is no longer possible, ensure you are following the steps to leave a church well rather than simply escaping.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Why are you leaving your church? Discuss with your mentor.
2. Which of the three wrong reasons to leave a church do you most find yourself tempted toward?
3. Who can you be transparent with about why you want to leave?

## 2

# DISCERNING YOUR REASONS FOR LEAVING

There are often multiple factors involved in a person's decision to leave a church. And to justify our decision to leave, we may be tempted to overshare, listing every discrepancy and disappointment we have ever experienced. For obvious reasons, this can lead to unnecessary tension, broken relationships, and all kinds of disunity and discord. Therefore, in order to leave well, it will be important for us to first think clearly about our reasons for leaving. You may have a number of hurts or hang-ups; this is to be expected. But what is the ultimate, underlying reason that is compelling you to part ways with your fellow church members?

Here are four broad categories that might help to clarify your reason for leaving. The category your reason falls under will then inform the way you go about leaving.

### **1. Practical Reasons** | It no longer makes sense to stay

Practical reasons for leaving a church can be pretty straightforward: you took a job in another city, and your family is moving; you moved to a different part of town, so the church is now 30+ minutes away; a close friend is planting a church nearby, and your family feels led to be a part of it. Assuming there are no additional underlying reasons for leaving, these decisions are very clear, and the process of leaving is fairly smooth.

But there are other practical reasons to leave, which, on the one hand, may be legitimate reasons, but on the other hand, are more challenging to discern. For example, what if your kids are getting older and there are no

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other children their age in the church? What if your child has special needs that the church's children's ministry is not equipped to support them? What if there has been a change in your work schedule that makes it challenging to attend services regularly, and joining another church with a different service time would resolve that issue entirely?

It helps to know from the outset that leaving a church for these more complicated, practical reasons is a matter of wisdom. In other words, these decisions are more like a dimmer switch than an on-off light toggle. It's not that we have to leave, and staying would be disobedient (an on/off switch); it's that a transition to another church may bring "more light" to our spiritual life in very specific ways (like turning up a dimmer). This can make it much more challenging to discern whether and when it is appropriate to leave. If you decide to move forward, knowing how to tell your pastor you are leaving with clarity and kindness is an essential part of the process.

If we are unsettled about our decision to leave a church even though it seems clear we should, this is often because our reason for leaving is ultimately practical—not doctrinal, relational, or directional. We love the brothers and sisters we are in fellowship with; we agree with their doctrine and share their philosophy of ministry. So why in the world would we leave? Because the church is no longer a good fit for us due to these practical complications. It is important to be honest about these practical barriers and allow yourself to truly weigh them without feeling guilty. If you are compelled to leave your church for a practical reason, then let that be the case. It's okay.

Of course, we should be careful to avoid consumerism, leaving a church as soon as we find a "better product" nearby. And yet, we also don't want to be foolish—struggling needlessly when there is a faithful church down the street that could easily help us address the challenges we are facing. Praise God, his Church is much bigger than any one congregation. And most of us live in a community with more than one faithful, gospel-preaching church. While it may be disappointing to leave your church under these circumstances—and possibly a bit awkward—that does not make it sinful or wrong.

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### **2. Doctrinal Reasons** | No longer like-minded

Doctrinal unity is absolutely essential to our church fellowship. As Paul writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). Every church’s identity and purpose ultimately flows from what they believe about God and his Word. Therefore, if we do not have a sufficient level of doctrinal alignment with the church we are part of, we must part ways with that church. Maybe the leadership’s convictions have changed. Maybe your convictions have changed. Or maybe you joined the church without much knowledge of its beliefs to begin with. Either way, there are doctrinal disagreements that justify leaving a church. The challenge is discerning which ones are significant enough to cross that threshold.

Here, I recommend Dr. Albert Mohler’s theological triage system, designed to help Christians discern the priority to be given to various doctrinal disagreements. In this system, there are three “tiers.” Below, I will give a brief overview of each tier, along with some pastoral guidance for those whose doctrinal disagreement falls within that category.

- First-tier doctrines are essential to the gospel. To reject or disbelieve these doctrines is to reject or disbelieve the entire Christian faith, or at least to do so much damage to it that it is no longer wise for us to maintain a friendly connection. For example, if a church denies that scripture is inspired by God, or that all people are sinful and deserving of God’s judgment, then there is no way forward to maintain unity with that church. In fact, we need to clarify that we do not share these beliefs, so that these false teachings do not compromise our witness.
- Second-tier doctrines are those that are essential for churches to hold in common. Disagreeing with a church on these doctrines means we can’t be members, even if we aren’t saying they are false teachers. Typically, these doctrines are in some way connected to the church’s practices (worship, ordinances, polity, etc.). Thus, disagreeing on these issues will make it virtually impossible to maintain unity as a member of the church. For example, if we are convinced by scripture that it is important to baptize our infant children, then we will have a very difficult time maintaining unity with a church that refuses to

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baptize them. Trying to do so would lead to either discord in the church or compromise for us. As we mature in the faith, our doctrinal convictions will often become clearer over time, leading us to find a church better aligned with our new, more settled beliefs. If you find yourself at odds with your church, begin an open and honest dialogue with your pastor(s) regarding how your convictions are developing or changing. Invite them to pastor you. Pray for extra patience, love, and wisdom. Then, if the disagreement persists, respectfully part ways while maintaining a strong bond of love and concern for your former church.

- Third-tier doctrines are those that we can disagree over while still remaining members of the same church. You may believe in a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Christ before the new heavens and the new earth; I may believe that, when he returns, he will bring the new heavens and the new earth right away. While these disagreements still matter, they typically do not prevent us from discipling one another or worshipping together. If we find ourselves disagreeing with our church or its leaders in these ways, it is probably best to make that disagreement known and then work towards pressing on together in love and unity. Not every disagreement is worth dividing over.

Which tier does your doctrinal disagreement fall under?

It is one thing to disagree on doctrine; it is another to disagree on how much that doctrine matters. Both can be valid reasons to leave a church, but they require different kinds of discernment. It is always important to discern where the disagreement(s) truly lie. Not every disagreement on a given topic necessarily falls within the same category.

No matter what, when assessing these doctrinal differences, make sure you are being both reasonable and charitable. Sit down with your pastors and take the time to truly understand what they believe and why. Always describe the church's beliefs in terms that its leaders and members would be comfortable using themselves. Do not go looking for foolish controversies; avoid them (Titus 3:9). But ultimately, if you find yourself disagreeing with your church on significant theological issues—especially

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in the first or second tier—then you should feel free to leave that church. Staying would likely do more harm than good for the cause of Christ.

### **3. Relational Reasons** | No longer able to trust

Every church should be a spiritual community marked by radical grace and forgiveness (Eph. 4:32). And yet, there are also occasions where the extent of the relational damage is so great that we can no longer continue in fellowship with the brother or sister(s) we are at odds with—especially if they are in a position of spiritual leadership over us.

There is one specific reason for this: We can no longer trust them.

Every pastor I know has experienced this dynamic in his ministry: a breakdown in trust between him and a member of his church, with no clear or easy path forward. When there is a breakdown in trust like this, of course, it is incredibly sad and unsettling for everyone involved, yet it is also a part of the Christian life in a sinful and fallen world. While every pastor needs to lead with wisdom, care, and integrity, unfortunately, there is no way to lead that will avoid conflict entirely. Even the most faithful, proven, Christ-like pastors I know have had members lose trust and confidence in them or their leadership.

Unfortunately, the loss of trust usually follows a predictable sequence of events. A conflict stirs up. Maybe there is an effort to resolve it, maybe not. But for whatever reason, both parties try to settle back into fellowship without working through the issue(s) at hand. After giving the situation some time and space to breathe, for a while, things may seem fine—until they aren't. As soon as the congregation has to make a difficult decision together or address a sensitive sin issue, this breakdown in trust will, without fail, rear its head. Gossip and dissension often ensue. Suspicion spreads. More damage is done. More relationships are strained. And sometimes, because the breakdown in trust occurred months (or even years) earlier, it can be virtually impossible to get to the heart of the problem and work toward a true and lasting resolution.

Early on in my ministry, I wanted to be extra careful not to respond to these criticisms in a way that could be perceived as defensive or harsh. But in hindsight, I think I made the opposite mistake. To avoid the accusation of

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being a bully pastor, I overlooked some very serious problems that should never go unaddressed. Simply put, if we do not trust or respect one another, we will never be able to honor Christ as members of the same church. There is just no way around it.

If there is a genuine breakdown of trust or respect between you and a member of your church—especially a leader—then it is vital for both of you to address it right away. Bring in a trusted member of the church to help you work towards reconciliation. Include the entire elder council. *Whatever you have to do!* But if, after a long and hard-fought effort to pursue reconciliation, one or both of you cannot move on and begin trusting one another again, then it will unfortunately be necessary for one of you to leave the church.

As we read in Hebrews 13, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” If we cannot submit to our pastors’ spiritual leadership with a clear conscience, then we cannot remain members of the church they pastor. In the same way, as elders, we are called to, “Pay careful attention to [ourselves] and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made [us] overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The churches we pastor do not “belong” to us. If we cannot love, respect, and trust Christ’s sheep in this same way, then it will be necessary for us to move on as well.

Similarly, if you have experienced a clear and egregious form of abuse within your church—i.e., sexual or physical abuse—then even if forgiveness takes place, this basic level of trust may never be possible again. This is why it’s important for churches to take this kind of abuse very seriously and to remove active abusers from membership. If that does not happen in your case, then it will unfortunately be necessary for you to find a congregation where the dark cloud of this abuse will not be hanging over your head every week for years to come. No one should be expected, much less pressured, to stay in fellowship with someone they cannot in good conscience trust. For many, this process of church hurt recovery is the first step toward finding a new church where they can safely grow again.

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Relational conflict is almost always the most difficult and painful reason to leave a church, but it is also among the most important. Staying just to prove a point or win an argument does not honor the Lord. In fact, it may contribute to a toxic church culture where people devour one another (Gal. 5:1), and careless speech spreads like gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17). Pray for the courage to speak clearly and address these conflicts directly through Christian conflict resolution. Pray also for the wisdom to navigate them in a Christlike way that honors the Lord and builds up his church. The devil loves it whenever hatred between God's people ruins their relationships and hampers their redemptive purpose in the world. Don't let him win. If you cannot reach a resolution and restore your trust, then that is a valid reason to leave your church. Identifying these signs it's time to leave your church can be the catalyst for a healthy church transition that preserves your faith.

### **4. Directional Reasons** | No longer on board

Sometimes, we can join a church we absolutely love—and then that church changes. Maybe a new pastor is hired who has a different philosophy of ministry. Maybe an expensive building project comes up that will make *fundraising* the church's primary focus for years to come. Maybe there is a hard push toward one political extreme or the other, and hot-button cultural issues have become a major distraction to the church's preaching ministry. There may be some minor theological differences beneath the surface of these issues, but they do not seem insurmountable. There may be some tension between you and the pastor(s) because of the concerns you have shared, but the relationships are not necessarily broken. These are not the issue. Your reason for leaving the church may not be theological or relational, but directional. You can no longer support the direction of the church.

It can be difficult to discern when these directional issues become serious enough to justify leaving. In most cases, we should be long-suffering, doing our best to work through any concerns we have about our church's direction. It may even be that your pastor(s) are helped by this feedback, and that it shapes the church's direction in encouraging ways. Therefore, if your reason for leaving falls within this category, it is probably wise to budget plenty of time to try to work through these disagreements with your

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pastors. Respect the appointed channels for communication. Do not voice your concerns to anyone other than the relevant leaders and perhaps a mature, trusted friend. Finding Bible verses about relationships can help ground these conversations in grace rather than gossip. And beware of letting these directional concerns become relational conflicts. This is all too easy, but it is a trap! The issues you have with your church's direction do not have to be personal. You can genuinely love your pastor(s), appreciate their heart for ministry, and even recognize their God-given competencies and strengths—but still disagree with the trajectory they are setting for the church. That is okay.

If these concerns persist after a heartfelt effort to resolve them, then it would be unwise to stay at a church just because we love and respect the men who lead it. Our love for Christ and fidelity to his mission are more important than our relationships with any one (or even several) pastors. As long as the disagreements are out in the open—respectfully stated and well understood by everyone involved—then both parties should be able to recognize that a transition is necessary, even if that is not the outcome they were hoping for. Take your time in discerning these things. Be careful and cautious as you look at what the Bible says about the church and its leadership. But do not stay at a church that you feel is leading you (and others) in an unwise or less-than-helpful direction. Understanding how to leave a church with this kind of integrity is vital for your future spiritual health and for a healthy church transition.

### ***When to Begin Searching for a New Church***

As soon as you've settled on a primary reason for leaving and your decision is made, it is time to start looking for another church. Do not delay this process until after you have left the church you're a part of now. As a pastor, it is deeply unsettling for a member to tell me they are leaving without an idea of what church they will be a part of next. This makes it very difficult for me to be comfortable with the decision. Whether intentional or not, leaving without a new church in mind can also communicate, "This church is *so bad* that I would prefer to have no church at all rather than continuing as a member of this one for even a few more weeks." How to find a healthy congregation falls outside the scope of this

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life skill guide, but suffice to say, we cannot leave a church with wisdom unless we have a plan to join another one very soon.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. After reading this section and reflecting on your situation, do you feel like you have a valid reason to leave your church? And if so, why?
2. Which category does your reason fall under: practical, doctrinal, relational, or directional?
3. Is there a specific insight shared above that should impact the way you go about leaving?

# 3

## TALKING WITH YOUR PASTOR(S)

Maybe you've enjoyed a close personal relationship with your pastor(s) for years, and you are concerned he will be deeply hurt by your decision to leave the church. Or maybe you hardly know your pastor(s) and aren't sure what to expect from them. Either way, communicating the decision to leave is one of the most difficult aspects of leaving.

Each situation is different, so it is hard to make any hard-and-fast rules about when or how to communicate. Some departures can be relatively quick with minimal communication. Others should probably involve long, drawn-out processes with ongoing back-and-forth dialogue—and perhaps a few ups and downs are to be expected. The timeline and intentionality of your communication will depend on multiple factors, such as how long you have been part of the church, how well you know the pastor(s), and how invested you have been in the church's ministry and leadership. The deeper your roots in a given church, the more time and care will be required to leave it with wisdom.

That said, here are three guiding principles that will help to make your communication effective, wise, and God-honoring regardless of how invested you have been in the church you are leaving.

*1. Transparency:* Talk about any issues you're experiencing early and honestly.

Always be forthright, and do not delay difficult conversations. If you ever experience an issue that might lead you to leave your church, it is important to engage with your pastor(s) right away. If you let these issues fester for months (or even years) without saying anything, it will create unnecessary tension and make your communication far more challenging.

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Pastors know that leaving a church is usually a difficult decision. If you only talk to them about the issues you are facing after you have decided to leave the church, this will probably create barriers in your relationship and communication. Imagine being in your pastor's shoes and wondering:

- How long have they felt this way?
- Why didn't they tell me about it until now?
- Are they really telling me the full story? Is there more going on?

Pastors are ordinary people, just like anyone else. Most of them genuinely care about the people they pastor; they want what is best for them. They also feel a sense of commitment to their members and a bond of fellowship with them, even if they are not close personal friends. Not to mention, whether they realize it or not, remember, they will also have to give an account to God for the souls they keep watch over (Heb. 13:17). Therefore, if we keep our hurt feelings, anger, or genuine concerns hidden from them, it will make it virtually impossible for them to pastor us. Learning how to tell your pastor you are leaving is an act of respect for this high calling.

I have lived in Wisconsin my whole life. Especially in the Midwest, we are known for going to great lengths to avoid having difficult conversations. While this may seem like a virtue—as if we are just erring on the side of meekness—in reality, it can be both sinful and cowardly. By failing to address the genuine issues we are experiencing, we can slowly but surely destroy our relationship with our spiritual leaders. This is where studying Scriptures for leaving a church can provide the courage needed for transparency. And worst of all, when we do this, we do it silently—often without them knowing the relationship has deteriorated, or giving them a chance to address the problem. Following the steps to leave a church well ensures that you exit with integrity rather than retreating in silence.

It makes sense why we are tempted to avoid these conversations. They can be emotionally charged. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. We don't want to be perceived as harsh or negative. We may be afraid of how our pastor will respond. It is very awkward and uncomfortable to say hard things. *Better to keep our mouths closed and try to carry on as if nothing is wrong, right?* While these are understandable hesitations, consider these words from Proverbs 27:

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Better is open rebuke  
than hidden love.  
Faithful are the wounds of a friend;  
profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (Prov. 27:5-6)

If you are considering leaving your church for reasons you have not yet discussed directly with your pastor, please consider slowing down and backing up a few steps. It may still be necessary for you to leave the church, but there is important relational work that needs to be done first so you can leave with wisdom. Leaving without being transparent causes more damage and is also far more uncomfortable in the end than if you had simply slowed down and had the necessary conversations.

Start by sending an email explaining that you have been experiencing some challenges, asking to meet and discuss them in person. You don't have to share everything upfront in this email, but it is helpful to at least give your pastor a general category. *"I've been struggling with some of the changes made to our children's ministry,"* or *"There is a conflict that has made fellowship more challenging lately."* Try to avoid setting up this meeting without letting your pastor know why it is necessary. By giving him a general category up front, your pastor will have time to reflect and pray about the situation before responding. This will help your in-person meeting go as smoothly as possible and be edifying (rather than explosive) for everyone involved.

Before the meeting, consider writing out your thoughts as succinctly as you can—or at least having a few bullet points to discuss. Then, sit down with your pastor(s) to share more about these challenges and how they have been impacting you. If you are confused about something they have said or done, then respectfully ask them for more clarity. If there is something that would need to change for you to stay at the church, respectfully let them know (and specify the change). After this meeting, everyone present should know (1) what is wrong, and (2) what the appropriate next steps are to try and address it. This way, if there is a peaceful way forward, you can begin working towards it together. In the meantime, while the issues may not be resolved yet, at least you know you are part of a good-faith effort to address them. While that may not fix the

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tensions you're experiencing, hopefully, it makes it possible to press on in fellowship while you work through them.

Frankly, if you are reading this life skill guide, chances are, you probably should have had at least one conversation with your pastor by now. Don't delay any longer! Reach out. Be transparent.

2. *Teachability*: Consider allowing a pastor to guide you towards a resolution.

These days, we have so many options for pursuing wisdom and guidance in our lives. For example, we can read books, listen to podcasts, watch YouTube videos, or ask an AI chatbot—and these are just the media-related options. When we experience some sort of internal distress, like anxiety or depression, we can pursue a psychological diagnosis, talk to a therapist, or make changes to our diet and supplements. With so many paths to choose from, it can be easy to think, “*Why do I even need a pastor?*”

Not to mention, in some traditions, pastors are not really expected to shepherd people. They operate more like the CEO of a large organization or a celebrity personality accessible only to a select few.

There are plenty of reasons not to expect much spiritual leadership from your pastor(s) these days. But in my view, this confusion about the purpose and need for pastors can easily lead to important breakdowns in communication. For example, if your pastor feels accountable to God to keep watch over your soul (Heb. 13:17) and you're not even sure you need a pastor, then that will make it very difficult for you to communicate with him—especially concerning sensitive matters like leaving a church.

To communicate well with our pastors, we first have to understand the work God has called them to do—*what role are they meant to play in our lives?*—and then, we should try to honor that calling in the way we engage them. In short, pastors are undershepherds who care for God's flock until the Chief Shepherd returns to do it himself (1 Pet. 5:1-4). It is *Jesus's flock* to be sure, but pastors are called to love and feed his sheep out of their love for him (John 21:15-17). Pastors must “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:13).

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They are called to, “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that [we] may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

In fact, if you were to summarize what a pastor is in a single word, one good option would be: *teacher*. God uses pastors to guide and instruct his people, according to his Word. Therefore, being teachable will make any communication with your pastors far more effective. Bring your problems to them. Share your concerns. Invite them into your burdens. Ask them questions. Then invite them to guide you according to scripture. That is what they’re there for!

This does not mean you have to hang on every word your pastor says. It certainly does not mean that he is infallible, or that we should accept whatever he has to say *because he is our pastor*. And yet, we should not feel permission to disregard or ignore his spiritual care either, as if we do not need or expect it. There is a reason why the scriptures say, “respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12) and also, “Let them [shepherd you] with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17b). All of us need pastors.

If our doctor senses that we are not interested in his insights into our physical health, or if our mechanic feels that we do not want his help with our car troubles, they will probably both have a similar response: “*Then what are we doing here?*” This is not because they are arrogant or self-important; it’s because we have fundamentally misunderstood the nature of our relationship with them. The doctor became a doctor to meet our physical health needs. The mechanic became a mechanic to meet our automotive needs. And in the same way, your pastor became a pastor to meet your spiritual needs and to teach you the ways of Christ. The nature of this relationship should also put a premium on communicating early. If we wait to see our mechanic or our doctor until the problems we face are unbearable, then it will be too late. The car may be totaled; the condition may be terminal. In the same way, it helps to be teachable early on. The longer we avoid being pastored by our pastors, the more difficult it will become for them to pastor us through the difficult things we are facing.

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3. *Tact*: If the decision is already made, then communicate it as clearly and graciously as possible.

Especially when we are deeply disappointed or hurt, it is tempting to use our words as a weapon. We often say more than we should, and we say it sooner than we should—without much prayerful consideration or forethought. This can lead us to communicate our decision to leave in harsh, cold, accusatory, or passive-aggressive ways. Try to avoid this at all costs. No matter what you communicate, when, or to whom—always be reasonable, charitable, and as kind as you can responsibly be. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so *that you may know how you ought to answer each person*” (Col. 4:6). When we speak in wise and gracious ways—with tact—it helps us to answer each person more effectively.

Of course, the opposite is true as well. The more careless and haughtier we are with our words, the more damaging and ineffective they become. Have you ever been so angry that you could no longer think or speak clearly? Our words can feel like a jumbled mess in our hearts, boiling up to a fever pitch and demanding to explode out of our mouths. In the classic movie, *A Christmas Story*, the old man lashes out at his furnace when it breaks down *again*. His son, the narrator, recalls his words in this way: “In the heat of battle, my father wove a tapestry of obscenities that, as far as we know, is still hanging in space over Lake Michigan.” There is also some important truth to that line. When we use harsh and careless words, they have a way of lingering in the minds of those who hear them! They continue doing their damage long after that last syllable rolls off our tongue. Even if our hearers do not remember what we said specifically, they will almost always remember *the effect* of our words. We must beware of this:

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.” (Jas. 3:5b-6)

When leaving a church, we need a healthy fear and respect for the tongue. Whatever we say, we should say it on purpose and with a great deal of

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thought and prayer behind it. Christ himself warns us about the spiritual dangers of speaking carelessly: “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak” (Matt. 12:36). So, before communicating, consider the posture of your heart. Do you feel on edge or defensive? Before you speak, ensure your words pass the test of being both true and necessary, rather than just being impactful or stinging. If you find it hard to speak with wisdom, then it may not be the time to have the conversation yet. Give yourself some space to reflect and pray. Seek the counsel of a mature, level-headed Christian friend who is unbiased and ideally removed from the situation. Invite him or her to point out where you may be tempted to speak in sinful or unwise ways. And most importantly, listen! Take their guidance seriously. In these situations, it can be very difficult to see ourselves (and our communication) clearly.

That said, communicating tactfully does not necessarily mean we should avoid saying anything difficult. Sometimes we will have to say difficult things. And we cannot measure the wisdom of our speech according to how well received it is. Difficult messages are not always well received. Yet, hard things can also be said in a way that makes them feel *even harder*. We should aim to do just the opposite. “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Prov. 16:7). To the best of our ability, let’s speak in such a way that prioritizes peace.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Should you have already reached out to discuss these issues? If so, what has prevented you? And how might that change the way you proceed with the conversation?
2. Are you going to allow any time or space for your pastor to guide you through the challenges you’re experiencing?
3. Are you speaking to clarify your situation, or to “win” an argument?
4. Have you shared this communication with a neutral, mature Christian friend and invited their input?
5. Is your primary reason for leaving the focus of your words, or is it possible you’re “over-sharing” secondary hurts?

## 4

# ADJUSTING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

This is arguably one of the most important steps involved in leaving a church well, and also the most neglected. Too often, we fail to consider how leaving a church will change our relationships with the brothers and sisters we once enjoyed fellowship with. And it should! How could it not? There is a special bond of fellowship shared between church members, a spiritual bond, and we cannot presume that this bond will stay the same if we leave the church we were once united to.

It is vital to consider this when deciding to stay or leave in the first place. But if you do leave, then you must do the difficult work of adjusting your relationships with those who stay at the church. It is best to do this deliberately and purposefully. Make a list of these friends, set up a time to meet with each, and begin prayerfully “hitting reset” on each friendship. Be careful not to speak about the church in harsh or disparaging ways. In most cases, you should assume these friends will stay, even if you are leaving due to serious concerns. Acknowledge that your decision to leave will change things. Express that, while you wish this were not the case, it seems wise to recognize that it likely will be. Discuss a new mutual expectation for the friendship and possibly some safeguards to help you avoid gossip or dissension. How will you fight the temptation to keep rehashing your departure every time you’re together? What topics should you probably agree to avoid? Once you leave, even a simple question like, “How is church going?” may feel very complicated and sensitive to discuss.

But most importantly, pray together! Prayer has the ability to put our hearts and minds in the right place, even in the midst of difficult and complicated situations. Pray that God be honored in both the church you are leaving

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and the one you will join next. Pray that the friendship continues in healthy and edifying ways for years to come. Express your ongoing love and care for one another. Long for the day when Christ returns to gather his Church as one, once and for all, when we will all be free from the burdens and pain of church life in a fallen world. If these prayers are hard to pray, or maybe a bit awkward, that's okay! Consider it a confirmation that the spiritual bond you have formed with these friends is genuine and meaningful. Praise God for that! Then ask Him to guide you both as you establish a “new normal” for your friendship.

Your ability to adjust these relationships will largely depend on how well you have navigated the process of leaving. Did you truly inspect your heart to consider how your spiritual posture might be contributing to the challenges you're facing? Did you actually discern your underlying reason for leaving? Can you talk about it clearly and in a reasonable, measured way? Did you communicate openly, honestly, and with tact? If not, then it will be very difficult to adjust your relationships healthily. There will be a newfound tension in these friendships, even if neither of you wants there to be. Many of the common bonds and shared experiences that once gave shape to your friendship will no longer be there. You may not see each other very often. Meanwhile, *they will* continue sharing experiences with your mutual friends who are still at the church. *They will* continue to listen to the same preaching and participate in the same ministries. New friendships and bonds will form that you are now unfamiliar with.

These dynamics are hard enough to navigate, even if you leave your church in the most honorable way possible. But if you leave in a rash or unwise way, these dynamics can feel insurmountable. In fact, for those who stay, even trying to maintain the same friendships with you can become a source of division within your now-former church. Whether intentionally or not, you can put these friends in a position where they have to choose whose side they are on. They may feel an unspoken pressure from you to leave the church as well, or at least to see things your way. To them, maintaining a friendship with you as if nothing has changed may feel like an implicit endorsement of your decision to leave—as if they now have to disapprove of their church to have your approval as a friend.

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This change in your relationships is one of the steepest costs of leaving a church. Leaving does not just change our religious affiliation; it changes our entire network of spiritual friends. Therefore, we have to factor this into our decision-making process from the beginning.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What relationships would be most costly to see change if I leave my church?
2. What am I doing to protect those friendships from sinful gossip through my departure?
3. How can I pray for my friends who I am leaving behind?



THE  
**MENTORING**  
PROJECT

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