

The Brown Street Beacon

"...Shine out among them like beacon lights,

holding out to them the Word of Life" (Phil 2:15-16)



Volume 3

August 21, 2016

Number. 27

Good and Bad Reasons to Change Local Churches

The local church is an arrangement set up by God. As we look at the church in the New Testament, we find that Christians joined themselves to local churches after obeying the gospel. The local church is made up of saints who work together in a specific geographical area. Each local church is completely autonomous, the elders only having authority over the flock that is among them (1 Peter 5:3), and is made up of Christians who form a spiritual family of brothers and sisters in Christ. Like a biological family, the saints in a local church take care of each other, helping each other in times of need. They spend time together away from the meeting place, engaging in spiritual and social activities (Acts 2:42-47). In the local church, brethren form some of the closest relationships that they have on earth and develop a bond in Christ that is hard to break. It is in the local church where Christians assemble and worship God together and give each other the strength to stand against the wiles of the devil.

While we are added to the universal church (Acts 2:47), we join a local church by choice (Acts 9:23-28). This being the case, Christians can join or leave a local church whenever they want to, provided they are in good standing with God when they leave, and the local church they are seeking to join is willing to accept them into their fellowship. There are sound reasons why a local church might not accept someone who wants to place membership with them, but I'm not going to discuss that in this article. Instead, I want us to consider Christians leaving a local church. There are good reasons for a Christian to leave a congregation; however, there are some bad reasons too. Let's consider both.

Good Reasons to Leave a Local Church

Obviously, there are times when people move out of an area and therefore have to change local churches. That's a given. But let's consider some other situations. If a local church persists in practicing something that is unauthorized by God, we should change local churches. The local church acts when it does something collectively, under the oversight of the elders, or whenever it uses the Lord's money. For example, what a local church does when it gathers together to worship is a part of the practice or work of that local church. So, if it is doing something in worship that is not authorized by the New Testament, we should not want to remain a part of that local church. If we do, we have fellowship in that work, by way of our personal presence and financial support, whether we agree with it or not. We are hearing a lot today of local churches of Christ deciding to use musical instruments in their worship services. Often, instead of offending some members who still believe that such is unauthorized by God, the church will have one service without the instruments and another one with them, giving its membership the option of which service to attend. The truth is, that is no option at all because whether one attends the service with the musical instrument or not, if he is a member of that local church, he is financially supporting the sinful practice. The point is, if a church adds musical instruments to their worship, not only is that a good reason to leave that church and

find a church of Christ that is faithful, it is our duty to God to do so. This would be true with any practice that is done without the authority of book, chapter and verse from the word of God.

Here's another good reason to leave a local church. If the church you are a member of begins to teach false doctrine, you should change local churches. John teaches us that anyone who does not abide in the doctrine of Christ, has not God (2 John 1:9-11). The passage indicates that we should not continue to have fellowship with that person. If we do, John says we become a partaker of his evil deeds. If the teaching is supported by the elders, and/or by the membership of the congregation, the church becomes unsound and is no longer faithful to the Lord. The only way to fix the problem is to correct the teacher, like Aquila and Priscilla did with Apollos (Acts 18:24-28), and thus, stop the false teaching from being taught. If the false teaching persists, a change of membership becomes necessary.

Another good reason to leave a local church is if immoral conduct is tolerated. This doesn't mean that the first time sin appears in the local church, one should leave. After all, the church is made up of members who sin from time to time. However, when a congregation demonstrates a willingness to allow immoral conduct to continue without taking any disciplinary action, it is fellowshiping the unfruitful works of darkness, something Paul tells us not to do (Ephesians 5:11). The church at Corinth was doing this and Paul condemned them for it (1 Corinthians 5). I know of congregations today that allow everything from unscriptural marriages to drunkenness to continue. That is not the kind of local church of which any of us should want to be a part.

Bad Reasons to Leave a Local Church

One bad reason for leaving a local church is a personal problem with a brother or sister in Christ. As I have indicated, the church is filled with people who sin from time to time, sometimes against each other. Remember though, we are a spiritual family in Christ. When problems happen, even when sin occurs, the family works it out. Jesus gives us the solution to differences between brethren and it is not jumping from one congregation to another every time we are offended. If you offend a brother or sister, repent, go to them and ask for forgiveness (Matthew 5:22-24). If you are the offended one, go to the one who has offended you and seek his repentance (Matthew 18:15). This is proper brotherly behavior.

Another bad reason for leaving a local church is because of a biblical disagreement that doesn't force one to compromise his convictions. There are not two brothers in the world who agree on every passage in the Bible. We can disagree with each other and still maintain fellowship, as long as the disagreement doesn't involve sin. If it is a case where I believe something is being taught that is putting souls in jeopardy, then I have to decide how long I can tolerate that, and the time of toleration should not be very long. However, if it is merely a disagreement over a Bible verse or passage, there is no need for a break in fellowship. If you think leaving a local church over such a disagreement is the proper course of action, good luck at finding a local church where every brother sees every passage the same way you do.

Finally, you don't have to leave a local church over a disagreement involving individual practices that are questionable. There are some things I personally believe to be wrong (*attending the high school prom, supporting institutions doing the work of the church, worshipping God with musical instruments at home, not withdrawing from a family member who has been disciplined by the church, drinking a glass of wine at dinner, etc., etc.*). I personally would not do any of those things, and would warn those who do that, at the very least, they are putting their souls at risk. My guess, however, is that in every church where I have preached, there have been members who do at least one of the things listed above. But since it involves individuals acting alone, and does not force others in the local church to violate their conscience, I just leave it between the individual and God. Quite frankly, I don't know what else to do. I could never find a local church, where there was not anyone practicing something on an individual level that I don't like. At the end of the day, we all have to

stand before the judgment seat of Christ, not one another (Romans 14:10-14).

The point of this article is this—the kind of things that should force a person to leave a local church should be things that actually put one’s soul in danger. For example, *unauthorized practices in worship, teachings outside the doctrine of Christ, unscriptural use of the Lord’s money, tolerating immoral behavior, etc.* These are things that would force me to leave a congregation. I can say with certainty, though, that at this local church, none of those things are done. Now, let’s be clear—a person can leave a local church for whatever reason he or she wants to. However, just because we can, doesn’t mean that we should. So, if once in a while we are offended by a brother or sister in Christ, or we disagree with something that is said or done, we should let love prevail and work it out like a family. After all, is that not what we are in Christ?

Don