

WHEN SOMEONE LEAVES THE CHURCH



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WHEN SOMEONE LEAVES THE CHURCH OR IS DISCIPLINED: A TIME OF VULNERABILITY

CHURCHES are incredibly vulnerable at particular historical moments. Because of this, church leaders need to carefully shepherd their flocks to prepare them for that flash point when temptations are many. After all, “the tongue is a fire” and “a world of iniquity” and is often “set on fire of hell” (Jam 3:1-12). This is why there are many opportunities for unrighteous fire in a church. How many? As many as there are tongues, but multiplied by all the conversations that are generated.

There are two very sensitive “moments” that need careful attention: when someone leaves and when someone is disciplined. During these influential opportunities, church leaders, church members, and onlookers have particular responsibilities before God to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). They need to be extremely sensitive to how the devil will attempt to steal, kill, and destroy (Joh 10:10).

1. When someone leaves your church

When a person leaves, when a key family leaves, or when an elder, deacon, or a gifted leader leaves, the church has entered a season of hyper vulnerability. Each of these situations has its own particular challenges. Let me suggest that the damage done can escalate according to the degree of prominence of the person leaving or disciplined.

It is always difficult on people when beloved families leave a church. Through it all, we ought to strive for gracious and humble goodbyes, instead of tearing into one another. “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal 5:14-15).

2. The vulnerability it creates for those who leave

Not only is a church like a “sitting duck” when someone leaves, the person or family who leaves faces a number of important decisions. He needs to grasp the fact that he has responsibilities before God to refrain from putting out a bad report. He needs to understand that whoever “slandereth his neighbor, him will I cut off” (Psa 101:5).

The people leaving are also exposed in the sense that they may say things they should not: things that tear down and do not build up, things that divide and that defeat a spirit of love in the church.

The loaded messages you leave them with will stick in their minds for a long time. Even if you say nothing, just disappearing is also leaving a powerful message. The nature of goodbyes is important.

3. The challenges for the people who stay

The people who stay are probably the most vulnerable because they may feel hurt. They will inevitably grapple with feelings of confusion or anger or uncertainty. This can change people to vipers. Or it may make them feel insecure or that they have somehow missed something and they should leave too. These are the common responses that some people will have, and they need to know their responsibility not to seek to use that as an excuse to find that tasty morsel that goes “into the innermost parts of the belly” (Pro 18:8).

4. When an elder leaves the church

When a key leader leaves, the people in the congregation are incredibly susceptible to a host of negative forces. Everyone in the church needs to be informed up front that if an elder (or even a family in the church leaves) they will be subject to temptations to anger, taking sides, gossip, speculation, rebellion, self-righteousness, presumption, wrong conclusions, and broken relationships. This situation is a perfect entry point for a host of misunderstandings. It is also a time where people are tempted to take a count of all the wrongs done to them by the people involved, instead of continuing to let them be covered over by love. When someone leaves, it is almost inevitable that there will be a wake of hurt feelings. Most of the people will be asking: “Why are you leaving us? Why are you rejecting us? What is wrong with us? Who made you leave? Ok, what is the real story? Whose fault is this?”

5. Magnifying problems

In this environment, it is common that people will magnify whatever real or perceived problems were there. They will be tempted to make too much of the problems that made the elder leave through speculation. Unfortunately, the sinful human mind often speculates in the wrong

direction—toward disunity and anger and separating brothers.

6. A lust for information

There will be a few who will want to know more than they should know. People in our society believe that they are obligated to know everything about the situation. After all, we live in “gossip nation” where people feel they should know all the dirt. You will find that some people will be relentless in trying to get the “real” story. This lust for information often results in further fracturing of relationships.

But like many things where biblical communications should be followed, everyone is not entitled to know everything, and there will always be some who will use this as a point of contention. It is here that a spirit of trust and honor toward those God has placed in authority must be upheld.

In times like these, conversation should be tempered by the reality of the timing of the judgment of God. Paul said to the Corinthians, “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God” (1Co 4:5).

7. Temptations for onlookers in the community

Fellow believers in the community also have responsibilities to the church of Jesus Christ, wherever it is organized as a local church. One of the heartbreaking aspects of people leaving is that you can often expect that some people looking in from the outside will speak confidently and condemningly about things they know very little about. Often they will judge your leaving either as further reason for condemnation of the ministry and will naturally be found saying hurtful things. People who have harbored hurts or who have an axe to grind are commonly among these onlookers.

8. When a church member is disciplined

This causes hundreds of dangerous conversations and opportunities to sin. There are two particular vulnerabilities that the devil will attempt to capitalize on.

The person being disciplined can be sinned against through the unrighteous conversation of other church members.

Likewise, the disciplined church member is extremely susceptible to unrighteous anger and

lashing back and making a mockery of the action taken.

Further, people in the congregation will be tempted to dishonor and disobey the authorities God has established in the church. The reality is that church leaders do not see everything perfectly and may make mistakes or even sin. However, this is not a valid excuse to escape their authority that God has established in a local church.

9. What should church leaders do in times like these?

Don't leave them unprotected: take action. People in the church often need to be reminded of the power of the tongue for evil; for "the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell" (Jam 3:5-6).

If a church is unclear or untaught regarding both the authority of the government of the church and the responsibility to govern the tongue, that church is extremely unsafe, poised

for a terrible fire. It is a building ready to burn at the slightest spark.

Churches often never recover from the tasty morsels that go down to the innermost being (Pro 26:22). Reputations are destroyed, friendships are ruined. No one wins because love was not covering the multitude of sins and human failings that surfaced during these significant moments (1Pe 4:8).

Perhaps this is why Jesus issued very harsh warnings about the use of the tongue:

“O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned” (Mat 12:34-37).

How do you have loving goodbyes when it seems so hard and confusing? How do you react to someone leaving? In times like these, it is wise to heed the admonition,

“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the

hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph 4:29-32).

