
SHOULD WE LEAVE CHURCH BEHIND?

An Email and a Reply

WHEN I RECEIVED THE EMAIL, I KNEW EXACTLY WHAT MY FRIENDS WERE ASKING. I WASN'T SURPRISED BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN HAVING SEVERAL SIMILAR CONVERSATIONS ALL OVER THE WORLD, especially in the last year. The question, *Should I leave my CHURCH* is not new. Most of the time the issue comes up out of frustration or hurt—legitimate or otherwise. Wounded, disappointed believers have been asking themselves, others and God that question for as long as CHURCHES have existed. When the vision of a local CHURCH and the vision of an individual for his or her life are vastly different from one another, it's probably even a good choice to leave that local congregation.

But today, more than ever before, believers are asking this question because they doubt the fundamental legitimacy and usefulness of *any* local CHURCH. The issue is not specific decisions or mistakes made by a CHURCH leader, but an overall challenge to CHURCHES everywhere. *Is the local CHURCH a distraction to or a distortion of the ministry Jesus wants us engaged in?*

Something's Changing

Over these past months, I have been sensing profound change in the near future for the CHURCH. As pleased as I am with the way in which we did CHURCH when I pastored for 22 years, I know with certainty I would pastor/lead differently today. Too many things have changed in our world. God is the Maker of seasons, and He advises His people to use different harvesting approaches for different crops. God invented change and new ways for us to respond.

Whenever change becomes the subject, it instantly creates a measure of fear, defensiveness or worry. The last thing I want to do is to create dread in the heart of pastors—or some need for them to defend their CHURCH program or their approach to ministry. Jesus does not instill fear in His CHURCH. However, He does alert shepherds to dangers faced by their flock, so when heresy or false teaching tries to worm its way into

our midst, something is supposed to rise up inside of us: an alert, a warning. That is not fear for ourselves; it is concern for others, and it doesn't usually tie us up in knots on the inside.

It is understandable that we fear the unknown, especially when it is a changed future. Sometimes, however, we become afraid because we worry that we are running or have run in vain—that we're doing something wrong, and we have been found out. Nothing I am sensing of impending change is even remotely connected with an indictment against *LEADERS* and *PASTORS*. I do not believe that the Holy Spirit is chastening or correcting the *LEADERS* of His *CHURCH*. Quite the opposite, I believe He is trying to give us an inside track for the future!

Is God Finished with Church?

Unfortunately, there are several voices that seem to be calling for an end to the local *CHURCH*. I even heard of one Frenchman who is declaring that *CHURCH* is a false God, and that we don't need the *CHURCH*; we just need Jesus and ministry without structure. Added to these wild calls to dissolve the *CHURCH* are several developments—like the *HOUSE CHURCH* movement. There is no denying a significant decline in *CHURCH* attendance, especially among long-term believers who no longer find *CHURCH* relevant or necessary in their spiritual walk.

It is as though the flock is scattering before our eyes. That should alert us to something fundamentally off base. Jesus taught us that if a shepherd is struck down, the sheep scatter (Zechariah 13:7). There can be no doubt that the enemy of our soul prefers to have the flock scattered! I do not believe that Jesus intends to see His *CHURCH* broken up primarily into isolated pockets of individual believers who have no appreciation for and receive no benefit from larger assemblies. Even in countries where persecution makes small-group fellowships the only option, there is always an earnest desire in believers' hearts for greater freedom to allow for larger gatherings! How odd it is that in countries where we are free to congregate publicly, in whatever-size *CHURCHES* some people suggest, we ought to fragment our fellowship or leave it as spontaneous.

One pastor friend of mine recently asked, "Why do we leave all the important subjects to the crazies and the weirdoes?" He was talking about extremist teachers/prophets who declare that the local *CHURCH* is obsolete, whose appeal to isolation and lawlessness lurk in every heart. Let's face it; it is much easier to live out my Christian life when I have no real accountability set up around me. Feeling that I am right and my leader is wrong, I can simply unfetter myself from the relationship and walk away. I don't have to wrestle with the challenging pain of submitting to leaders with whom I disagree.

And as long as I keep my fellowship group small enough, I'm unlikely to find much difficulty in relationships—because the group is, by definition, highly selective and

exclusive. The more informal the group, the less likely any member will need to go through protracted seasons of disagreement or discomfort with any other member. There will be no “iron-sharpening-iron,” no struggles to get along with fellow believers. “Just me and Jesus” is profoundly off-center from the New Testament record where we read of the CHURCH learning to respond to Hellenistic widows neglected in daily rationing (Acts 6:1-7); disharmony between individuals like Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2); as well as the constant exhortation to “preserve unity” (Ephesians 4:3), and not to forsake gathering together “as is the habit of some” (Hebrews 10:25).

Make no mistake, there are many ungodly and spiritually dangerous reasons why individuals get tempted to draw away from regular CHURCH involvement. For example, Proverbs 18:1 explains that some people separate themselves in order to pursue their own “desire,” unchallenged by the wisdom of others. Sometimes, the lying whispers of slanderers divide and scatter a flock (Proverbs 16:28; 17:9). Self-seekers, fault-finders and worldly-minded people can also create divisions (see 3 John 1:9-11 and Jude 1:16-19).

A Church for Our Era

But what I’m sensing in the larger Body of Christ today is neither what some extremist teachers are espousing nor what carnal saints are following. Those are both smoke screens and distractions. I’m interested in how the Holy Spirit is whispering something wonderfully fresh, trying to change the way we think about and do CHURCH. I don’t feel threatened by this change; I feel excited and hopeful. Months from now, we will have a better vocabulary and a better understanding, so we will be able to dialogue about these developments far better than I am able to speak of them today. But I want to get started.

As I have said, a kind and good God is trying to alert the *LEADERS* of His CHURCH to a reorientation that will make His CHURCH more capable for more ministry in today’s world. Let’s not forget that God is more aware than anyone of the changes going on in our times—and the vastly different mindset of this era compared to previous eras. Could we all agree that God has never been one to lag behind the times; He is the God who prophesies and arranges the future! Since God knows what is coming, He knows best how to position His CHURCH to take full advantage of the changes developing in our culture.

I received an email from some friends in another part of the world (see below). It is typical of the kind of conversations I’m having with people everywhere. Long-time believers. Sincere followers of Christ. Seasoned *LEADERS*. Mature Christians. In essence, this couple is wrestling with the decision of whether or not to leave their local CHURCH. You may not have had similar conversations with people you know, but I promise you that these thoughts are swirling around in the minds of many Christians.

[EMAIL FROM A SOLID AND DEDICATED CHRISTIAN COUPLE]

Happy New Year Daniel!!! Hope you and your family are doing good!?

Since the Leadership Conference I had the impression I should write you, it was an up and down... But since last night I felt, I have to! But first, no pressure, if you are not able to answer—by the way, it's ok! [Husband] told me, He had a conversation with you once early in the morning... This morning He felt He should go earlier to the breakfast and see if He would meet you there... So it really felt like a meeting from God!

For [Husband] and me, since several months, we felt, how we live church, it's not really satisfying anymore and we desire for much more.

The last months we met often, different kind of Christians from all different kinds of churches. It just came so. And... I prayed to have Christians as neighbors and it really happened! In our house and we meet from time to time, encouraging each other in the way with Jesus and to look outside of the church! It's so great! With the others it was similar, sharing with each other our faith and our visions... and feeling God has something new and fresh for us, that He would like to do something new with our church, with this I mean the Body of Christ! When we have spend time with this people, it felt like church!

Many things we were living in our church, I don't see so much anymore and things were happening lately not so fun with people...

Last night we have been with friends and sharing our lives and suddenly [Husband] told us, since a time it came up more and more in him, He doesn't feel good anymore in [Church] and to see things how [Pastor] is doing, and said, the time is over He thinks and it would be better to leave the church.

For me it was kind a shock! Yes of course, since about 3 years I don't feel so good anymore and I tried always to do what God was asking me to do and to pray for our church and to encouraging people to look on the good things... I got tired... At the moment I feel confusion, frustration, sadness and have many questions about things we are doing where I'm not sure anymore if it's so in the bible...

We heard a sermon from a guy named [Man]. He was pastor for 20 years. God called him out of this and He got another ministry. God met him once, when He almost died and said to him: "Stop to preach about revival, preach about reformation, I want do a new thing and changing structures, church living and theologies..." About this time, [Woman] and [Man] got the same word! We felt more and more, "how we live church," it's not really functioning. When [Husband] tried to speak with [Pastor], He couldn't get through. Since many years I submitted to [Pastor] even I saw some things different. Today, does this sound crazy? Is it better to get out?

Should I submit to [Husband] even I don't have the peace yet? Sometimes I don't know what means submissions under my husband. What do you think? I really would like to do what God has for us! Sorry, this mail is so long and I stop now!

MY EMAIL IN REPLY [EXPANDED FROM THE ORIGINAL]

Hello [Woman] and Happy New Year to you and [Husband],

I am so happy you wrote me. The questions you ask and the implications for your lives are BIG—and not so easy to answer via email. But I will do my best...

Let me begin by telling you what I am hearing and seeing all over the world. Many, many believers are finding CHURCH unsatisfying. The feelings of dissatisfaction are not really about specific situations or people. Obviously, conflicts and disagreements over decisions, etc. can always be a problem, but when so many people in so many countries are having the same feeling I conclude that their feelings are not really about their individual local CHURCHES.

So let's start there. I think it will be a big mistake if you conclude that the problem is confined to [CHURCH], or that if [Pastor] made different decisions you would be more satisfied.

Something much bigger than your local CHURCH is going on. I don't yet have the right words to describe it, but when I read your email, I smiled to myself because what you are describing is what I have been trying to describe. Many believers desire more than just a weekly service. They long to be "ministry agents—to be more active in sharing with others, and living out their faith in spontaneous, informal ways. I suspect that many of the Christians you have been meeting from other CHURCHES are feeling the same thing. So, I do not really believe the problem is with [CHURCH] or any other specific congregation.

In fact, I don't really see this as a problem at all. Rather, it seems that God, by His Spirit, is alerting us (prophetically) to something He wants to be doing in the future. [Husband] is a prophetic guy! And your passion for the unsaved will always leave you feeling dissatisfied if you live out your faith mostly within the walls of the CHURCH.

I don't think this is the time to leave your CHURCH as much as it is a time to help lead your CHURCH. As you are discovering, leadership in the Kingdom is never a simple matter! It requires that we surrender often, pay a huge price of personal sacrifice, and continue to resist the temptation to stop leading. What I mean by that is this: once we leave a group—because they are not yet ready to go where we want to go—we are no longer leaders! We have surrendered our responsibility for others, and have put our own needs/desires ahead of theirs. We have stepped into isolation, and no one can follow us where were going.

This is a mistake that I see many believers make. They don't understand that leadership is a long process filled with many points of frustration. As a leader, I must always balance a tension. Of course I want to go where God wants me to go; but I also have a responsibility to bring people with me. So I must be sensitive about how quickly I move. **There are many people who believe they are following the leading of God to leave the CHURCH they have been a part of. But I almost never see those ending up as leaders in the future. They tend to merely fade away from any lasting ministry, and squander all that was invested in them.**

Oh, they might gossip and say bad things about CHURCH LEADERS in order to get people to follow them out of the CHURCH, but once they get out of the CHURCH, they rarely lead anyone through the Scriptures or disciple anyone in the things of the Kingdom. I have watched so many disgruntled saints become more and more isolated, and less and less engaged in ministry. Bitterness is the usual outcome when people attribute their issues to others' faults. Can you name even one former leader who left your CHURCH in [country] who now exercises any regular leadership/discipleship role for the sake of others? I've known your CHURCH for many years, and I cannot!

Spontaneous, informal fellowship is fabulous! I'm glad that you are meeting up with other Christians and gathering in your home to share with one another. That really is the meaning of CHURCH. But I have also discovered that lasting spiritual results almost always require some kind of structure. Again, it is difficult to maintain the proper balance: if there is too much structure or if we rely too much on programs, the spontaneous life and vitality drains away; but if we just have spontaneous meetings with individual believers, and have no regular structure or regular instruction, the fruit tends not to last.

I urge you to be very careful in the decision you make.

I will tell you a personal secret: the denomination I have been part of for nearly 35 years has mostly been frustrating to me. I cannot even begin to tell you how many disappointments and hurts have come into my life as a result of my continued participation in our denomination. Many, many times I wanted to leave it. I was sure they were not going in the right direction. I was sure they were missing it! Why have I stayed in the Movement all these years? I have stayed because there are only three alternatives: 1) join up with another group/church that will end up having as many problems; 2) start an independent group that will end up having as many problems; or, 3) refuse to connect and submit myself meaningfully to the Body of Christ.

If I leave my CHURCH or my denomination, I can no longer lead the people I love who are in them. They are the reason I have stayed in our denomination.

So, here's the very difficult question for you: What will you do after you leave [CHURCH]? Are you really ready to offer yourselves as spiritual LEADERS who promise to care for, nurture and disciple these many believers that you are coming into contact with? Or, would you prefer to teach them, by your example, so that they can flourish in their spiritual walk without vital, ongoing participation in an assembly of other believers. [By the way, how much of your spiritual understanding and maturity do you think is due to the many years you sat under regular teaching at CHURCH—and connected with CHURCH members who were further along in their walk?]

Long ago I lost count of the men and women who received love, mending, training and spiritual empowerment at our CHURCH, but who later forgot about doing to others what was done to them. When it came time to “grow up” and exchange the thrill of receiving ministry for the responsibility doing ministry, they found fault with the very place/process that God used so mightily in their life! I'm actually somewhat proud that our CHURCH couldn't keep pace with their ever-increasing appetite for being blessed, rather than being a blessing to others.

Right now, the out-of-CHURCH happenings in your lives all seem exciting and spiritual. But remember, a tree must be judged by its fruit. True spiritual fruit takes a long time to develop. I wonder if people truly understand just how much pain and suffering and thankless, unsatisfying work is required for authentic spiritual breakthrough? Harvests only come after a long string of bone-wearying days. Jesus doesn't invite His followers to be ministry connoisseurs, excitement-seekers or free agents; He calls us to be bondservants who can always find a way to be a blessing to others—regardless of the setting.

I'm not really a spiritual person just because I can walk into an orchard and pick several apples when they're in season. I am a spiritual person only if I am willing to do all of the hard work for many months leading up to an apple harvest. I have to fertilize, water, dig out the weeds and do many not-so-exciting things. That's why I'm a spiritual pragmatist: the question that most guides my life (when I do not hear specific instruction from the Lord) is “**Where and how can I do the most good to the most people over the long-haul?**”

Immediate excitement isn't the same thing as long-term engagement. For all its warts and blemishes, the local CHURCH is still the best arrangement to keep believers in ministry connection with one another to impact their community over many years.

What God is doing right now is very, very big. Even for someone like me who has walked with Jesus for decades, it is still hard to discern what He is doing—and what He wants us to do. But one thing I know for certain. Our response in this changing season must be spiritual in the true sense of the word. Spiritual is not always what I want, or what satisfies

me. Spiritual is long-suffering and patient and self-sacrificing. Spiritual sows in tears and remains steadfast even when others benefit more than we do from our participation.

Of course, I will love you whatever you two decide. I sincerely hope that you will find a way to participate in spontaneous ministry outside of CHURCH without making the decision to completely leave your CHURCH. Both you and [CHURCH] will lose something if you do.

With much love, Daniel

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