

Loving the imperfect church and feeding from imperfect sermons

1 Cor. 1:2 – together with all those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

1 Cor. 1:13 – is Christ divided?

1 Cor. 15:1-9 – not everything is of first importance¹

1 Cor. 13:2; 16:14 – everything with love

Heb. 12:14; Eph. 4:1-6; Phil. 2:1-4 – strive for peace and unity in the truth²

Letter from Calvin to Cranmer: “It is to be numbered among the evils of our day, that the churches are so divided one from another, that there is scarcely any friendly intercourse strengthened between us ; much less does that holy communion of the members of Christ flourish, which all profess with the mouth, but few sincerely regard in the heart.”

J.I. Packer in *Themelios* 1996: “The great Puritans were as humble-minded and warm-hearted as they were clear-headed, as fully-orientated to people as they were to Scripture, and **as passionate for peace as they were for truth**. They would certainly have diagnosed today’s fixated Christian intellectualists as spiritually-stunted, not in their zeal for the form of sound words but in their lack of zeal for anything else.”

Thomas Goodwin: “I never yet took up party religion in the lump... I have found gospel holiness where you would little think it to be, and so likewise truth. And I have learned this principle, which I hope I shall never lay down till I am swallowed up of immortality, and that is, to acknowledge every truth and every goodness wherever I find it.”

1. Listening to a dull sermon³ – approach prayerfully, expectantly, with coffee, with a notepad
2. Listening to a biblically inadequate sermon – not gullible but eager (Acts 17:11), not fault-finding (Lk. 11:54)
3. In both types – “pray to take away something that is true and put it into practice”

Receive with awe and joy wherever Christ is preached, regardless of the motive (Phil. 1:17-8), even if the preacher “be evil... the Word of God remains true and good” (2nd Helvetic Confession, ch. 1)

¹ The ancient creeds recognised these things of first importance – the Trinity, the fully divine and human Son, the suffering of Christ for our sins. Baxter: “Lay not too great a stress upon controverted opinions, which have godly men, and, especially, whole churches, on both sides. Lay not too much stress on any point of faith which was disowned by or unknown to the whole Church of Christ, in any age, since the Scriptures were delivered to us. Much less should you lay great stress on those of which any of the more pure or judicious ages were wholly ignorant.” Cf. issues re. eschatology, baptism and church government.

² For an extended treatment of the Reformed doctrine of the catholicity of the church and the need to pursue unity in the truth see [Lusk, Proposal](#). Similarly see [Richard Baxter on Unity](#).

³ These three points are taken from the very helpful booklet (in the iServe library): Christopher Ash, *Listen Up! A practical guide to listening to sermons*.

When & how to challenge false teaching

1. Knowledge puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1). It shouldn't do but sadly it often does. The knowledge that we are filthy sinners saved by pure grace should be completely humbling. We must be known as the most humble people on the planet who look down on no-one.
2. Matthew 7:3 – recognise your own ignorance, error and sin
3. 1 Timothy 5:1-2. And if that is written to Bishop Timothy, how much more should we approach our elders in the church *privately* and with the utmost respect and gentleness.
4. Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 6:1-2 – loyalty, honour, respect, submission (versus Generation Y).
5. 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 22-26.
 - a. Flee unnecessary quarrels about words.⁴ Avoid endless fruitless arguments. Young men particularly need to beware their natural tendency to seek fights.
 - b. Take every opportunity to handle Scripture well yourself and preach the gospel clearly from the Scriptures. **The best way to fight the darkness is by shining a light.**
 - c. Paul does occasionally call out false teachers by name. He does this out of love for the flock – warning them of wolves. (N.B. there is a great difference between a) a godless false teacher who is unteachable and determined to lead people astray and b) a brother in error who is trying to do his best to teach the Bible but has simply had less opportunities for training in the Word and who is correctable.)⁵
 - d. We must pursue love and peace just as hard as we pursue truth.
 - e. When it comes to correcting it is to be done with *the utmost gentleness* and with a genuine love and concern for the one we are trying to correct.
 - f. God is sovereign over whether people will change.
6. 2 Timothy 3:16. The *Bible* is our means of correcting. This means that instead of just arguing about doctrine we get the Bible open with people and humbly invite someone to look at with us and simply ask, "How do you read it?"

⁴ Richard Baxter: We must learn to distinguish between real controversies and merely verbal ones – where it is just an issue of different language. "Lay not too great a stress on those controversies that are merely verbal, and which if they were anatomized, would appear to be no more."

⁵ Christopher Ash, *Listen Up*: "a person is not a heretic if they get something wrong by mistake, and then put it right when they are corrected [e.g. Apollos]."

When & how to leave a church

Some helpful articles:

- [Simon Finders, 'When it's time to go: the what, why and how of leaving church' \(Briefing, Nov. 2009\)](#)
- ['I don't like the direction my church is heading. How can I know when it's time to find another church?' \(9Marks\)](#)
- ['What To Say To Church Members Leaving for Poor Reasons' \(9Marks\)](#)

The following is a combination of the above articles.

Church is family. It should be very hard to leave

Our churches are families, where we take ownership of one another's discipleship to Christ. They are not country clubs, where we come and go for the benefits. Because of this loving, inter-dependent, *family* nature, leaving your church is no small thing.

Questions to ask yourself before you leave

1. Are you "counting other more significant than yourselves" ([Phil. 2:1-4](#))? If you did, would that change your outlook?⁶
2. Have you been demonstrating an "eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the body of peace" in the church ([Eph. 4:3](#))? If you did, would that change your outlook?
3. Who would be affected by your departure? Would your leaving help to protect the gospel (because your faith will be hurt in this church and you would not encourage others to stay either) or hurt the gospel (because, as a professing believer, you should be pursuing patience and forgiveness, not an easy out)?

God's Word places a priority on preaching the Word, humble listening to the Word, centring everything on the gospel of Christ, wise and loving leadership, and serving one another.

4. Are you being fed by God's Word? Does the church neglect to preach biblical sermons weekly? **Are you hearing about Christ crucified?**
5. If you have a family, is your *family* being fed by God's Word?
6. Are your concerns about the new direction biblical or cultural? Do you not like the church's style or is there a more substantive concern?
7. Are you looking for "the perfect church"? That is, are you demanding a level of perfection that is unreasonable to expect in this world?⁷

Unreconciled relationships or long-harboured grievances *are* a big deal, not to be papered over. They *should* be addressed. That's not to say every broken relationship can be fixed this side of heaven. A person might have wisely determined that a certain relationship cannot be fixed. Still, they should not run away from trouble, either.

8. Are you harbouring bitterness toward someone who has offended you? Have you spoken with an elder or pastor about your concerns? If so, and you've not been "heard," is there chance that you're now personally offended, in such a way that your judgment is clouded?
9. By the same token, is there anyone at all you need to forgive? Any sour relationships?
10. Are you under church discipline or headed for church discipline and seeking a way out in moving?

⁶ We don't want to be what's-in-it-for-me church shoppers. [Aaron Loy, 'It Meets My Needs' and Other Bad Reasons for Choosing a Church', Relevant Magazine.](#)

⁷ Calvin: "we see some that leave the church because they require in it the highest perfection. They are indignant at vices which they deem intolerable, when they cannot be corrected: and, thus, under pretext of zeal, they separate themselves and seek to form for themselves a new world in which there is to be a perfect church... As then these are inflamed with a zeal so rigid that they depart from God himself and violate the unity of the church... Many err in this way grievously, imagining when they see the evil mingled with the good that they will be infected with pollution unless they immediately withdraw themselves from the whole congregation."

When to go

Leaving should be rare, a last resort. But there are five cases in which it will be the wise thing to do:

1. When false teaching has taken hold. Some false teaching or wrong emphasis in a church is not always sufficient reason to leave (e.g. Corinthian church or the churches in Rev. 2-3) – sometimes we should stay and fight for the life of the church. Nevertheless, there may be times when false teaching has taken hold of a church, and serious efforts to bring correction have proved fruitless. The preaching goes against some central Christian truth, does so dogmatically and persistently and energetically, seeking to persuade others. We ought to move away from that kind of church.
2. When unsuitable leaders are immovably established – i.e. unrepentant ungodliness cf. 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1.
3. When infecting sin is going unchallenged – i.e. 1 Cor. 5.⁸
4. When a special opportunity for service or training arises elsewhere – e.g. mission
5. When your church is no longer local – i.e. when forced to move elsewhere

How to Leave Your Old Church

What should you do?

1. **Keep praying and ask others to pray for you.** Before, during and after leaving. For yourself and your family for wisdom and graciousness, for the church you are leaving (you should still want what is best for all those you left behind) and for a new church family to join.
2. **Discuss it carefully** – get the wisdom of mature Christian friends.
3. **Try to leave graciously.** When someone voluntarily leaves a church (not because of a move or a graduation or a deployment) it is usually a painful experience. You've probably been hurt or disappointed. Maybe you dislike the new pastor or the new direction of the church. The temptation in these situations will be toward bitterness. You may want to leave with all your guns blazing but better to err on the side of gentleness.
4. **Tell the pastor you are leaving.** This may be the most important point [and very unusual in the Kenyan context where “no-one ever leaves a church... we just don't go there much anymore”]. Please let someone know you are going. If you tell the leaders you are leaving, they can pray for you. Maybe they can clear up a misunderstanding. Or maybe they need to learn from your experience. Just don't go silently into that good night.⁹
5. **Leave off a ledge.** I got this imagery from a dear member who recently left our church and did so with great grace and magnanimity. He told me that as he thought about leaving he decided he didn't want to drift away, slowly pulling away and dropping his commitments. He said he'd rather take a leap off the ledge and be fully engaged until the moment when he decided it was time to go. Be in while you are in, and then when you are out, jump right out.
6. **Learn how to kindly and honestly answer the question “Why did you leave?”** People will ask you, so figure out your answer. Don't kill someone's character or disembowel the whole church with your reply. Don't lie either. A simple, straightforward answer will suffice. We didn't agree with the direction of the church. We disagreed with some of the doctrines being taught. We didn't feel like we could submit ourselves to the authority of the church any longer. Tell the truth, but speak it in the manner you would want the church to speak about you.

⁸ But even here note the caution of Calvin: “If churches are well ordered, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom But because pastors are not always zealously on the watch, and are also sometimes more lenient than they should be, or are hindered from being able to exercise the severity they would like, the result is that even the openly wicked are not always removed from the company of the saints. This I admit to be a fault and I do not intend to excuse it, since Paul sharply rebukes it in the Corinthians. But even if the church be slack in its duty, still each and every individual has not the right at once to take upon himself the decision to separate. Indeed, I do not deny that it is the godly man's duty to abstain from all familiarity with the wicked, and not to enmesh himself with them in any voluntary relationship. But it is one thing to flee the boon companionship of the wicked; another, in hating them, to renounce the communion of the church.” (*Institutes* IV:1:15).

⁹ Finders makes an even stronger point on this: “Be as public as possible. Given the mutual belonging that characterises church, it's important that the whole family be aware of what's happening... it's not a small thing for a person to leave a family.”

7. **Develop a plan right away for how you will look for a new church.** It may take you some time to settle in a new place, but start working on your plan right away. Will you visit these ten churches? Or two churches? Will you visit them once or three times? What is important to you (and your family, and God!) in finding a church? Don't allow yourself to float aimlessly for months and years. Too many church floaters just float away.
8. **Don't burn bridges.** If you were a faithful member of your previous church, you will keep running into those who are still there. You'll see them at weddings, funerals, open houses, and school functions. Maybe even family reunions! It's bound to be a little awkward but do what you can to keep the relationships intact. Many of them are worth saving. And you may need them later.
9. **Don't be afraid to feel and express grief** – it's a painful thing to leave a family.