

# THE HERALD

Newsletter of the Orrville Grace Brethren Church

## 7 Steps for Leaving a Church Wisely

By Ken Sande

I've talked with many people who left their churches. Some did it for valid reasons and made the transition wisely and graciously. Others were driven by pride, bitterness, or resentment, however, and their departures often caused considerable confusion and pain to others.

If you or someone you know is ever considering such a move, here are seven steps that can help you make this transition in a way that honors God and demonstrates love for others.

### 1. Make Sure You Have Valid Reasons

Since the Bible often describes the church as being a "family," the ideal would be to remain in one church all of your life, just as you would be a part of your birth or adopted family all of your life. Since we live in a fallen world, however, life in even the best of churches will have its disappointments and inevitably require resolving conflicts, bearing with others' weaknesses, accepting differences, and forgiving others ... sometimes repeatedly.

There are situations, however, where it is appropriate to consider changing churches. Potential reasons include, but are not limited to:

- Relocation or traffic changes make it difficult to be involved in your church on Sundays and throughout the week.

- Significant changes or differences in foundational theological doctrines, such as the authority or inerrancy of the Bible, the divinity of Christ, or the centrality and nature of the gospel.
- A divergence with the mission, vision, ministry priorities or social positions of the church is so significant that you can no longer support the church wholeheartedly.
- You will have significantly better opportunities to use your gifts and abilities in another church (e.g., in a cross-cultural, international, or refugee ministry).
- Despite your best efforts, you see minimal evangelism, few people being saved, and little if any spiritual transformation in yourself, your family, or others in the church.
- You can no longer confidently and comfortably invite others to visit your church.
- You have seen such significant lapses in the character, judgment, or biblical integrity of your church leaders that you can no longer sincerely submit to their spiritual authority in your life.

### 2. Be Honest About Your Own Motives and Failings

Whenever you feel inclined to end a relationship with either a church or another individual, the natural human tendency is to magnify others' deficiencies and wrongs while minimizing your own. Therefore, it is wise in such situations to take a hard look at how you may have

contributed to the breakdown in your church relationships (see Matt. 7:1-5).

You can begin this process by asking God to search your heart and reveal any sinful attitudes toward your church leaders or other members, such as pride, envy, jealousy, a critical spirit, bitterness, or unforgiveness (Ps. 139:3).

Another helpful step is to ask those who are closest to you to candidly point out any attitudes or actions they see in you regarding your church that are not honoring to God, loving toward others, or reflecting the patience, kindness, and mercy of Jesus (Prov. 12:15; Ps. 141:5; Eph. 5:1).

The more honestly you face your own sinful attitudes and actions, the more graciously and wisely you'll be able to engage the people around you (Matt. 7:5). This may lead to such improvement in your relationships that you'll be able to stay in your church. If not, you'll at least be better prepared to communicate humbly and constructively as you make your transition.

### **3. Affirm the Good in Your Church**

When people have been disappointed in their church, they often develop a critical attitude that causes them to compile a growing mental list of every flaw in the church while ignoring or minimizing its virtues (see Prov. 11:27). One of the best ways to counter this tendency is to practice the peacemaking advice Paul offered to two conflicted women in the church at Philippi:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8-9).

In some cases, this attitude adjustment will enable you to see the value of staying in your church and continuing to work on your differences. Even if that is not the case, this exercise

will enable you to sincerely affirm to others how God has worked in and through the church.

### **4. Resolve Outstanding Conflicts**

One of the most frequent reasons people leave a church or ministry team is unresolved conflict with the leaders or other members (Acts 15:36-41). This is especially common with people inclined to escape from conflict rather than face it honestly and openly.

Therefore, you must do everything in your power to address any unresolved conflicts with other members or leaders in your church (Matt. 5:9; 23-24). Others may not respond as you would hope, but if you've done all you can to live at peace, you can at least depart with a clear conscience (Rom. 12:18).

### **5. Talk with Your Leaders**

As soon as you start thinking about the possibility of leaving your church, go to one or more of your elders and share your concerns with them humbly and graciously (1 Peter 5:5; Rom. 13:7). In many cases, this will allow you to clear up misunderstandings, resolve offenses, or suggest changes that they may see as beneficial for the entire church.

If you don't see sufficient changes to allow you to stay in the church, circle back to the elders to let them know when you've decided to leave. Be as gracious and respectful as possible, making every effort not to damage relationships or burn bridges.

### **6. Say Goodbye to Friends**

If you've been in a church for any length of time, you've probably formed some special friendships. These friends would be confused and hurt if you suddenly disappeared without saying goodbye. You wouldn't want them to do that to you, so don't do it to them (Matt. 7:12). Instead, take the time to let them know that you're leaving, preferably through a personal conversation.

If you are leaving because of serious con-

cerns about the doctrinal direction of the church, it may be appropriate to share those concerns so that others can continue to pray and discuss them. If you find it necessary to mention such things, avoid judging the hearts or motives of others (James 4:11).

However, if you are leaving for non-doctrinal reasons (see above), avoid itemizing those matters and instead be as positive as possible, so you do not diminish others' commitment to the church. Affirm the good things in the church and indicate that for personal reasons, you will be looking for another church where you can use your gifts and energy more effectively to serve the Lord and his people.

### 7. Commit to a New Church

However disappointing or hurtful your last church was, don't let that experience keep you from finding a new church home as soon as possible (Heb. 10:25). God designed us to thrive in the midst of a close spiritual community (Acts 2:43-47), so it is vitally important that you diligently explore other churches in your community until you find one that aligns with your theology and personal convictions and gives you ample opportunities for spiritual growth and service to others.

### Summary

If you carefully work through each of these seven steps, you may discover ways to resolve the disappointments you have with your church and continue to enjoy fellowship there. If not, you'll at least have the peace of mind that comes from avoiding impulsive actions and treating others in a way that honors God and demonstrates genuine love and respect.

### Reflection Questions

- Have you ever thought of leaving a church? Why? If you actually left, do you have any regrets?
- Think of people you know who have left a

church wisely and graciously. What did they do that made their departure as positive as possible?

- Think of people who did a poor job of leaving a church. What did they do that made their departure disturbing or hurtful to others?
- If you find that you have been developing a negative attitude toward your church, take a few minutes to read Are You Velcro or Teflon and to answer the reflection questions at the end.

## Are You Velcro or Teflon?

By Ken Sande

Kelly can be one of the best friends in the world. She's thoughtful, caring, and always eager to encourage and serve others. The people in her Bible study and small group always look forward to seeing her, and her coworkers think she is one of the most pleasant people they'd ever known.

But there is a small circle of people who do not experience her this way. These are the people who have gotten onto her "black list." Most of them got there by failing to meet her expectations or by saying something critical about her.

This typically leads to her feeling unappreciated or attacked. If the offensive behavior is repeated, she eventually begins to see herself as the innocent victim of other people's sinful behavior. Once that happens, Kelly turns into human Velcro.

She automatically assumes the worst about everything the black-listed person does. Like Velcro, she grabs hold of every piece of evidence that supports her critical view of that person, and like Teflon, she lets evidence that favors them slide by unnoticed and unremembered.

Before long, these people are in a no-win situation. Even when their positive actions far outnumber their failures, she remembers only



their flaws and never their virtues. Thus, getting off her black list and out of her jail of judgment can seem nearly impossible.

Are you a Kelly? I am.

Not all of the time, but more often than I like to admit. Although I generally tend to be charitable toward others, if I'm offended frequently or deeply enough, especially by those I expect a lot from, I'm fully capable of becoming human Velcro.

Perhaps you are too.

If so, how can we break free from this miserable habit? Here's three steps that usually help me.

First, I ***confess to God that this critical attitude is inexcusable, sinful, and a terrible offense to him***. He sent his Son to die for our sins, to wash them away, to give us a fresh start every day (Col. 1:21-22). How wrong it is of me to hold people's sins against them when Jesus has already paid for them in full!

Second, I ***meditate on and pray through Bible passages*** that remind me of God's lavish forgiveness through the gospel and his unequivocal commands to imitate his kindness and acceptance.

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us (Ps. 103:8-12, ESV).

Love keeps no record of wrongs.... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Cor. 13: 5-7, NIV).

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness ... be put away from you,

along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4:30-32, NIV).

Third, I ***ask God to give me grace to reverse my critical Velcro/Teflon tendency*** and turn it into a positive habit. How? By making a conscious effort to become like Teflon when people irritate me, letting their offenses slide quickly out of my memory (Prov. 19:11), and to become like Velcro with regard to their virtues, seeing, celebrating, and remembering every evidence of God's grace in them.

As the Apostle Paul taught two embittered women in the Philippian church nearly two thousand years ago: Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:8-9).

These three steps do not address every aspect of dealing with personal offenses. In fact, as I'll discuss in an upcoming blog, there are times when overlooking offenses is the wrong thing to do. But for the vast majority of us, reversing the Velcro/Teflon tendency is a step in the right direction.

### Reflection Questions:

- Do you have a "black list"? Who has been on it? How did they get there?
- How do you think of people on your black list? How do you treat them?
- How do you think they feel about the way you view and treat them?
- How do you feel when you've got an active black list? What does it do to you?
- Do you want to break this habit? You can start by practicing the three steps given above.