



When and How to Leave a Church...or Not

This article has been difficult to complete ... not because of the subject but because of the timing of its release. It seemed that whenever the article was considered for publication, fellow believers—in different localities and in various churches—would announce they were leaving a church to join another. As a result, work on this article would cease in order to avoid it possibly being viewed as a “written retaliation” against dear friends in Christ. On the other hand, biblical guidelines of “when and how to leave a church” are not readily available. Thus, a greater impetus was sensed to publish this material for God’s glory and for the benefit of fellow believers. Even though this article is written specifically for believers who plan to leave a church, its contents should also be helpful to other believers affected by or responding to such a circumstance.

THE FIRST STEP IN LEAVING A CHURCH IS TO STOP AND THINK

The first step of leaving a church involves stopping. Stop to make sure you know the basics of what the Bible says about *church* and the loving relationships that are integral to its well-being.

[In this study, the words *church* or *ekklesia* are used to identify a group identified as the “called out ones” in the New Testament. The word church (not italicized) is used to identify a religious organization, often incorporated or given legitimacy by another governing power.]

A biblical view of *church* can be overshadowed by today’s “church world” of buildings, pulpit, organization, programs, and meeting schedules. These accepted “church components” can divert believers from *being the church*, especially with regard to personal relationships. When this diversion occurs, a decision to leave a church typically disregards biblical perspectives and practices associated with *church*. This decision often overlooks Christ-centered relationships as well, which is unfortunate since relationships in a *church* stem from God’s love for His children through Christ. God’s children—in response to His love—are to freely give unselfish, sacrificial love to one another at all times and in every circumstance.

1 John 3:16, By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

1 John 4:7, Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:11, Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:19, We love because he first loved us.

LOVE IS ESSENTIAL WITH REGARD TO THE NEXT STEP IN LEAVING A CHURCH

When you face a decision with regard to life and relationships, you should rely on biblical truth and its application instead of relying primarily on personal perspectives. Jesus identified the two foundational truths that apply to every aspect of life and relationships when He answered a legal expert’s question about the greatest commandment.

Matthew 22:35-40, And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus said that the two greatest commandments involve “loving God” and “loving others.” With these biblical perspectives in mind, your answers to the following questions can help determine if the Lord is directing you to leave a church.

1. Will my leaving give further evidence of my love for the Lord?
2. Will my leaving demonstrate my love for others, especially my brothers and sisters in Christ with whom I have meaningful relationships?

Both of the above questions should be answered with a resounding “yes” before you leave a church. If your “yes” has biblical integrity, you will already be living out the answers to these next two questions.

1. What does it mean to love God?
2. What does it mean to love others?

Let's begin with what it means to love God. Loving God is more than feelings and more demonstrable than a printed theological statement. Scripture links *obedience* to the Lord as the hallmark characteristic of loving God.

John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

1 John 2:5-6, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

1 John 5:3, For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

Your consideration of leaving a church gives you an opportunity to evaluate your love for the Lord. This is determined by your on-going obedience to God's Word. If your life is characterized by consistent obedience to the Bible, then you should be eager to respond to biblical reasons for leaving a church and follow scriptural guidelines in doing so. Yet, if it becomes apparent that there is no biblical basis for you to leave a church, you will stay where you are out of loving obedience to God's Word. *Scriptural guidelines (the "how") to leave a church are associated with scriptural reasons (the "why") to leave a church. Both the "how" and the "why" are presented later in this study.*

In addition to your evaluation of loving God—demonstrated by personal obedience to Scripture—you also have opportunity to evaluate your love for fellow believers when you contemplate leaving a church. The "love chapter" (1 Corinthians 13), along with other scriptural passages, presents characteristics of Christ-like love that should characterize your on-going relationships with others.

See [Are You a Loving Person](#) on the WordTruth website.

Specifically, when you are thinking about leaving a church—or doing so—love for others should be evident. Every step of the way should be one of patience, kindness, lack of irritability, no resentment or arrogance, and no insistence to go your own way. Additionally, leaving a church according to the will of God will always be accompanied by truthful, edifying speech that exalts Christ and encourages others to grow in Him.

ANOTHER STEP IN LEAVING A CHURCH IS TO REALIZE WHO MAKES THE DECISION

There are biblical reasons to leave a church which bring honor to the Lord, follow Scripture, and provide measureable benefits to others. (*Various reasons to leave a church are covered later in this study.*) On the other hand, if you plan to leave a church primarily on the basis of personal preferences, with minimal thought of how your decision impacts others and with minimal input from fellow believers, please consider the following:

Philippians 2:1-4, So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but *in humility count others more significant than yourselves.* ⁴*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [Emphasis added]*

Romans 15:2, Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

Proverbs 15:22, Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.

1 Corinthians 10:24, Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

1 Corinthians 13:5, (love) does not insist on its own way ...

Romans 12:16, Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

The above verses indicate that it is unwise for a believer to make a decision that affects other believers apart from their input. By communicating with one another, believers can come to a more accurate understanding of the effects—both beneficial and detrimental—that may result when a fellow believer decides to leave a church. In reviewing verses presented thus far, it would be safe to say that any personal decision affecting other believers—and leaving a church certainly falls into that category—should be a matter of prayer and discussion by all concerned.

MORE REASONS TO INCLUDE FELLOW BELIEVERS IN YOUR DECISION TO LEAVE A CHURCH

Relationships in the Body of Christ provide the framework for a group to consider any spiritual decision together. Believers have been sovereignly ordained to function together to accomplish God's purposes and bring glory to Him. For

example, believers are members of one another (Romans 12:3-5). Believers are to build up each other in love as they work harmoniously to grow in Christ (Ephesians 4:15-16). Believers are supernaturally equipped to minister together for the common good (1 Peter 4:10-11; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

Romans 12:3-5, For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Ephesians 4:15-16, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

1 Peter 4:10-11, As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1 Corinthians 12:7, To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

If you make a decision “alone” without input from fellow believers who are impacted by your decision, you disregard the supernatural benefits of Body Life and possibly create unnecessary bewilderment for other brothers and sisters in Christ.

PRAYING TOGETHER FOR GOD'S GLORY AND THE COMMON GOOD

Praying together is one of the great benefits in the family of God. Praying for one another is a vital part of Body Life and is characteristic of being members of one another. Believers, from the first century until now, have availed themselves of this privilege, especially when facing decisions and significant challenges of life.

2 Corinthians 1:11, You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

1 Thessalonians 1:2, 5:25, We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers . . . Brothers, pray for us.

2 Thessalonians 1:11, To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power,

Acts 21:5, When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed

James 5:16, Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

In the past, have you asked other believers to pray for or with you? If you asked others to join you in prayer then, will you ask fellow believers to join you in prayer about the possibility of your leaving a church? If not, why?

Typically, believers eagerly recruit others to pray with them when they lack clarity about a decision or situation and desire God's will to be realized. On the other hand, when thinking about leaving a church, believers often do not ask fellow believers to pray with them because their decision already “leans toward leaving.” In other words, believers who plan to leave a church often grasp a preconceived “answer to prayer” and do not want input from fellow believers who will pray and, perhaps, receive a different answer from the Lord. However, when others in the Body are denied the privileged responsibility of praying with and for one another, the reality of Body Life is disregarded. In addition, the danger of a departing believer “going it alone” can be regretfully realized.

When believers pray together about a common request, they can rejoice together when God provides the answer. In the process, each believer can realize the benefits of mutual ministry, learn more about God's answers to prayer, and take steps to grow in Christ.

See [God Always Answers Prayer but Not as We Think](#) and [Don't Lose Heart](#) on the *WordTruth* website.

KNOW THE SCRIPTURAL MEANING OF CHURCH BEFORE PLANNING TO LEAVE ONE

If your understanding of “church” is primarily associated with buildings, programs, leaders, or methods of worship, then a review of the biblical definition of *church* is in order. You may think that a word study is not relevant to “leaving a church” but, without it, you could be relying on cultural perspectives that may or may not correspond to Scripture.

WHAT DOES CHURCH MEAN? . . . PERHAPS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

Is your understanding of *church* based on buildings, programs, worship music, missions, pastors, fund-raising, corporate structure, scheduling, and age-level ministries? The New Testament perspective of *church* does not deal with any of these. The New Testament word for *church* does, however, refer to an assembly, a gathering, and on one occasion, a mob. This word also indicates that those in the group come together for a common purpose.

The word translated *church* comes from *ekklesia* (transliterated from the Greek language) and is phonetically pronounced *ek-klay-see'-ah*. This word is formed from two Greek words: *ek* (meaning “from” or “out of”) coupled with a derivative of *ka-leo* (which means “to call, invite, or name”). Thus, the basic meaning of *ekklesia* is “to call out of” or, with relation to a group of people, the “called out ones.” Thus, it is understandable that *ekklesia* has been translated as “congregation” or “assembly” or “company” although these words dilute the core meaning that *ekklesia* (*church*) has a greater emphasis on people being “called out” by God instead of their meeting together.

HOW IS CHURCH USED IN SCRIPTURE?

Matthew’s Gospel records the first mention of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, and Jesus was the speaker. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus mentioned *ekklesia* when He responded to Peter’s acknowledgment that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In Matthew 18:17, Jesus also used *ekklesia* when He taught His disciples how to restore unrepentant believers.

Matthew 16:18, . . . and on this rock I will build my church (*ekklesia*), and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 18:15-17, If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (*ekklesia*). And if he refuses to listen even to the church (*ekklesia*), let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Ekklesia indicates what a group **does** as much as what a group **is**. For example, the following passages refer to various groups of people (*ekklesias*) who are “called out” to meet together for specific purposes that involve most, if not everyone, in the group. As you will note, an *ekklesia* can be oriented to God’s purposes or to selfish interests.

Acts 7:38, This is the one who was in the congregation (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. (In this verse, *ekklesia* refers to the people of Israel who were “called out” to Mt. Sinai in order to hear from God through Moses.)

Acts 19:23-41 describes the mob scene in Ephesus in which the Apostle Paul’s life was at stake. In this passage the *ekklesia* was actually a mob, a group of people “called out” for a specific purpose that could lead to murder.

Acts 19:32, Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly (*ekklesia*) was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

Acts 19:39, But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly (*ekklesia*).

Acts 19:41, And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly (*ekklesia*).

1 Corinthians 11:17-18, But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church (*ekklesia*), I hear that there are divisions among you . . .

1 Corinthians 14:4-5, The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church (*ekklesia*). Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church (*ekklesia*) may be built up.

WHEN DID THE NEW TESTAMENT EKKLESIA BEGIN?

The *church* was birthed in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost over 2,000 years ago. The New Testament book of Acts, chapter two, describes this beginning as well as the characteristics of this young *ekklesia*.

The remainder of Acts lists the many highlights of the *church*’s early years. During this time, the Good News of Jesus Christ was proclaimed initially to Jews in Jerusalem and later spread to Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. Since Jews and Gentiles were God’s “called out ones” (*ekklesia*), their mutual hostility was transformed into a cooperative unity due to their common salvation provided through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:13-16, But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

¹⁵by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two [*Jews and Gentiles*], so making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility [*insert added*].

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHURCH AND OTHER EKKLESIAS?

Even though *ekklesia* can refer to any “called out” group assembled for a specific purpose, a New Testament *church* differs from all other assemblies, groups, or gatherings. What is the distinction? It is this—A New Testament *church* is a divinely birthed **organism** (emphasizing life, growth, love, relationships) that is fundamentally different from a humanly formed **organization** (emphasizing structure, authority, accomplishments, goals). This critical distinction is often blurred in today’s “church world.”

Interestingly, a church that functions like a corporate structure (an organization) may have many *ekklesias* within it. As a result, believers can easily leave a “church organization” and its associated events/programs but have great difficulty leaving a small group of believers (*ekklesia*) within that same organizational structure.

HOW MANY EKKLESIAS ARE MENTIONED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

As an organism, the *church* in the New Testament can refer to all the “called-out ones” throughout history (the universal *church*). It also refers to all believers in an area, a certain town, or in a home. For example:

- **UNIVERSAL CHURCH**

Ephesians 1:22-23, And he (*God*) put all things under his (*Jesus*) feet and gave him as head over all things to the church (*ekklesia*), which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (*italics added*)

Ephesians 3:20-21, Now to him (*God*) who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church (*ekklesia*) and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (*italics added*)

Colossians 1:18, And he (*Jesus*) is the head of the body, the church (*ekklesia*). He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (*italics added*)

- **BELIEVERS IN A PARTICULAR GEOGRAPHIC AREA**

1 Corinthians 16:1, Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches (*ekklesias*) of Galatia, so you also are to do. (*italics added*)

Galatians 1:22, And I (*Paul*) was still unknown in person to the churches (*ekklesias*) of Judea ... (*italics added*)

1 Thessalonians 1:1, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church (*ekklesia*) of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. (*italics added*)

- **BELIEVERS IN A SPECIFIC TOWN OR CITY**

Acts 11:22, News of this reached the ears of the church (*ekklesia*) at Jerusalem ... (*italics added*)

2 Corinthians 1:1, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church (*ekklesia*) of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia (*italics added*)

Revelation 1:11, ... Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches (*ekklesias*), to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. (*italics added*)

- **BELIEVERS IN SOMEONE’S HOME**

1 Corinthians 16:19, The churches (*ekklesias*) of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church (*ekklesia*) in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (*italics added*)

Colossians 4:15, Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church (*ekklesia*) in her house. (*italics added*)

Philemon 1:1-2, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church (*ekklesia*) in your house: (*italics added*)

YOU ARE IN MORE THAN ONE EKKLESIA

By observing the above uses of *church* in the New Testament, it is evident that all believers, past and present, are in the universal *church*. As a member of the universal *ekklesia*, you are also in a *church* identified by its location in a larger area (such as a continent, country, state, or region). Locally, you are part of an *ekklesia* in your city, town, or village. Many believers also meet in smaller *ekklesias* comprised of two or three believers up to a few dozen in a variety of

settings. A local *ekklesia* can regularly meet in a large hall that can accommodate many people or—on a smaller level—meet in a home, an office, an open field, or even under a tree. The meeting location of the “called-out ones” is irrelevant; the relevance is that the “called-out ones” are coming together.

With the exception of the universal *church*—which you cannot leave—you can leave any other *ekklesia* to join with another. For example, you may choose to leave a group of believers (*ekklesia*) on one continent to join another group (*ekklesia*) on another continent. On a less expansive scale, you might move from a small *ekklesia* to another group (*ekklesia*), even in the same village or neighborhood.

In light of the relationships that are integral to *church*, it follows that a *church* is a family (Galatians 6:10). A *church* is also a body of which Jesus Christ is the Head (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Galatians 6:10, So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (*or family of believers*). [*Italics added*]

Ephesians 4:15-16, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

A CHURCH IS NOT DEPENDENT ON A BUILDING BUT IS DEPENDENT ON RELATIONSHIPS

When a believer decides to leave or join a *church*, another building or meeting location is often in mind. In the New Testament, however, *church* is never linked to a building even though there is often a building in which a *church* may meet.

With relationships in mind, when you “leave a *church* to join another,” you depart from one group of believers in order to meet with and be in relationship with another group of believers. This is much more significant than merely leaving one worship service to begin attending another.

There is also an aspect of “leaving or joining a church” that is often overlooked. If you had the time, giftedness, and interest, you could be in a number of *churches* (*ekklesias*) simultaneously. You do not have to “completely” leave a *church* in which you now participate in order to be a functioning member of another *church*. This movement can sometimes be labeled as “church shopping” or “church hopping,” but that is a limited perspective. For example, if you are a gifted teacher, you might teach in many *ekklesias*. If you are a gifted administrator, biblical counselor, or pastor, you could be of great assistance to a number of *ekklesias* in an on-going manner. If you want to study the Bible in subject areas or for a specific ministry purpose, you might attend a number of study groups (actually, *churches*) on a regular basis. If you are a musician, your skills might benefit numerous *ekklesias* and put you in relationships with many other believers.

Being part of multiple *churches* simultaneously is not a recent development. In the New Testament, an *ekklesia* sometimes sent out some of its own members to fulfill a ministry at another location (for example: Acts 13:1-3). Representatives (missionaries, teachers, prophets, emissaries) from an *ekklesia* were used by God to start new *ekklesias* (Acts 13-14), teach correct doctrine over an extended period of time in an established *ekklesia* (Acts 18:1-10), bring news or directives from one *ekklesia* to another (Acts. 15:22-31; Acts 16:4-5), or appoint leadership in young *ekklesias* (Titus 1:1-5). These “called out ones” were members of a local *ekklesia* that sent them out, and they were also members of their traveling ministry group (*ekklesia*) as well as possibly becoming part of the *ekklesia* that was their destination.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CHURCH

There are misconceptions about *church*, some of which result from an acceptance of the cultural perspective of church at the expense of the biblical definition. Other misconceptions result from traditions that are often not carefully examined for biblical integrity.

When the biblical definition of *church* is overlooked, smaller gatherings of believers who meet on a regular basis are labeled “small groups” yet, according to the New Testament, many would fulfill the characteristics of a genuine *ekklesia*. The foundation of an *ekklesia* is, at its heart, a few believers who are committed to the risen Jesus and one another and, as a result, meet together with a view to ministry and growth in Christ.

Some believe that a group of believers who meet regularly cannot be considered a *church* unless there are scripturally qualified leaders (elders) in the group. In the New Testament, however, *churches* were established as a result of people believing in Jesus Christ who then met together regularly. Logically, only after a church (*ekklesia*) came into existence was it possible to appoint (recognize the Holy Spirit’s choice of) elders to shepherd the young flock of

believers.

An *ekklesia* may exist but not be considered an “official church.” This non-recognition can come from secular or religious sources. Secular authorities may not recognize small group gatherings as an “official church” because there are governmental requirements that must be met by the group. As a result, believers may choose to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” and comply with “non-profit, corporation, or other ratification requirements” to be an “official church” as recognized by the government. In a government sanctioned “church,” there are usually corporate officers, corporation meetings with recorded minutes, and systematic filings to the government. Legal matters pertaining to property are typically accomplished through the government’s statutory framework for an “official church.”

From a biblical perspective, however, believers who decide to become a government recognized church can also “render unto God the things that are God’s” and function spiritually as a New Testament *ekklesia*. Much of the confusion concerning “what is a New Testament *church*?” results from trying to mix characteristics of a government recognized church with the living reality of a New Testament *ekklesia*. The members can be the same in both entities, but only one is a true New Testament *church*.

Strictly speaking, one can be an official member of a government sanctioned church corporation and not even be a believer. On the other hand, if one is a believer in Christ, that person is automatically a member of a New Testament *ekklesia* which requires no official sanctioning from any secular authority.

Further confusion over “what is a church?” can also result from trying to combine characteristics of a New Testament *ekklesia* and a denominationally recognized church. Denominations have requirements for a particular group of believers to be “officially” recognized as a church in that denomination. Until a group of believers meet those requirements, they are considered a “home mission work” or a “church plant” or a “home group” but not a “real” church. Even though a group of believers may not be recognized as a church by a denomination, they could be an *ekklesia* by New Testament standards.

As this study indicates, there is much more to *church* than is sometimes recognized. When the various issues and perspectives are recognized and evaluated in the light of Scripture, authentic *ekklesias* can more clearly emerge and bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ.

WHAT HAS BEEN PRESENTED TO THIS POINT?

Hopefully, you recognize that any decision to leave an *ekklesia* is multi-faceted with regard to fellowship, ministry, and relationships. If and when this decision is considered, the process and eventual outcome should:

- ☞ Demonstrate your love for the Lord.
- ☞ Demonstrate your love for fellow believers.
- ☞ Provide opportunity for you and other believers to grow in Christ and experience Body Life by joining together in prayer, study, and discussion to determine God’s will in the matter.
- ☞ Recognize that *ekklesia* means the “called out ones” with four specific New Testament expressions (universal, particular geographic area, specific town, and someone’s home or local meeting place).
- ☞ Consider the possibility of participating in more than one *ekklesia* simultaneously (As mentioned earlier, what is sometimes described as “leaving” can sometimes include maintaining ministry and/or relationships in one *ekklesia* while also being in other *ekklesias*) as well.

The decision to leave an *ekklesia* should not be made:

- ☞ Apart from prayerful and open communication with fellow believers.
- ☞ Merely on the basis of personal judgments, preferences, or emotions.

SELF-ORIENTED REASONS TO “LEAVE A CHURCH/EKKLESIA”

There are many time-worn, self-centered reasons that believers have used to validate leaving a church or *ekklesia*. On the other hand, there are biblically based reasons to leave. The selfish reasons are easy to list, but the biblical reasons require additional explanation.

Some self-oriented reasons to leave a church or *ekklesia* are: I don’t like the pastor . . . I don’t like the music . . . I don’t like the programs . . . I don’t like the sermons . . . I don’t like the unfriendliness . . . I don’t like being ignored . . . I don’t like the church’s leaders . . . I miss programs and ministries that I’m used to . . . I don’t know very many people . .

. I don't like being asked for money . . . I don't get that much out of the worship time . . . I just don't like the way "they do things" . . . I don't like some of the people there.

As you probably realize, the basis of the above list is the big "I" . . . a challenge for every believer. From a positive perspective, the above excuses can be viewed as motivation to "die to self" in order to more effectively love God and others.

See [*Is Dying to Self Really Necessary*](#) on the *WordTruth* website.

Believers who have a practice of "dying to self" are qualified to participate in spiritual evaluations and challenges of life. Their qualification results from their practice of identifying and removing detriments in their own lives that inhibit spiritual clarity (Matthew 7:1-5). This on-going maturity is a result of consistently living out the Word of God (Hebrews 5:14).

Matthew 7:1-5, Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Hebrews 5:14, But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

See [*You Can Change ... One Step at a Time*](#) and [*Loving Yourself—What Does the Bible Say?*](#) on the *WordTruth* website.

PRACTICAL, VALID REASONS TO LEAVE A CHURCH OR EKKLESIA . . . THE FIRST PART OF "WHY LEAVE?"

Matters of everyday life can become valid reasons for you to leave. For example:

- ☞ If the distance, time, and money used to travel to a meeting place can be better invested in ministry efforts and relationships "closer to home," you might decide, on the basis of personal stewardship, to start or join an *ekklesia* nearby. This may, initially, mean meeting with a visible church in the community with a view to being part of a smaller group of believers (*ekklesia*) as relationships are formed.
- ☞ If an *ekklesia's* meeting time does not harmonize with your family or work schedules, then another *ekklesia* would probably be sought.
- ☞ When it becomes apparent that a disabled or handicapped family member cannot be cared for at an *ekklesia's* meeting place, then another *ekklesia* that can meet this need might be able to fill the gap.

The above examples illustrate some of the practical reasons that may precipitate your leaving a church or *ekklesia*. Even in these situations, however, everyone in your *ekklesia* should be made aware of the situation for the purposes of praying, planning, participating, or accommodating you in some way with regard to your eventual decision. Remember, an *ekklesia* is a family, not simply a meeting to attend.

BIBLICALLY BASED REASONS TO LEAVE A CHURCH OR EKKLESIA . . . THE SECOND PART OF "WHY LEAVE?"

In addition to practical reasons illustrated by those listed above, there are other reasons to "leave a church/*church*" that are scripturally significant. The following reasons are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but they do illustrate that leaving a church or *ekklesia* is often linked to believers maintaining scriptural truth and personal integrity.

- **YOU SHOULD LEAVE IF:**

The teaching, discipling, and counseling consistently depart from God's Word. As a result, the corresponding centrality of Jesus Christ is minimized in matters of life and relationships.

How can a "church" or *ekklesia* bring honor to the Lord if God's Word is integrated with or supplanted by supposed "authoritative sources." It cannot.

How can divine truth be taught and practiced when mixed with secular "truth" based on natural wisdom? It cannot.

How can God be accurately revealed apart from His revelation through Jesus? He cannot.

How can life make any sense and possess an eternal purpose without Jesus being recognized as the author and finisher of our faith as well as the focus of our existence? It cannot.

See [Truth is Personal, Not Merely a Concept](#), [Truth, The Measurement for All Aspects of Life and Relationship](#) and [What Do You Believe . . . No, Really](#) on the WordTruth website.

Sadly, natural wisdom and personal preferences are the basis for much teaching and preaching in the “church world” today. All such pronouncements can actually be classified as “false teaching” and can be exposed by the simple question, “Where in the Bible does it say that?” At every opportunity, false teaching presented by professing believers must be challenged. If there is no challenge, error seems to “win” over truth in the public arena.

Since the family of God is an inter-related network of “body relationships,” the involvement of fellow believers is often necessary to deal with false teaching. If fellow believers will not deal with these situations, then the prospect of your leaving is a distinct possibility. Also, if there is a sustained effort (often by leadership) to stifle challenges against teaching that doesn’t clearly conform to Scripture, then should you stay in such an environment? You should not.

See [False Teaching in the Church and How to Oppose It](#) on the WordTruth website.

- **YOU SHOULD LEAVE IF:**

There is a lack of integrity in the group’s financial matters that is not addressed.

A specifically *measurable* threat to loving God is stated by Jesus in Luke 16:10-13.

Luke 16:10-13, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? *No servant can serve two masters*, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. *You cannot serve God and money*” [*emphasis added*].

In the above passage, Jesus related a parable in which a rich man’s financial loss was due to the dishonesty of his trusted manager. The self-oriented manager misused funds entrusted to him and manipulated others to further his own financial gain. In Christian circles, the use of funds and accounting records can also be manipulated for selfish, personal advantage. Honesty and openness in dealing with financial matters are critical factors in the life of any church or *ekklesia*. If openness with regard to a group’s use and accounting of funds is not supported nor practiced by leadership, the lack of openness should be enough warning for you to leave.

Since financial practices have legal and spiritual implications, your decision to leave can depend on what can occur in both of these areas. For example, if expenditure or accounting misdeeds are discovered and appropriate actions are taken to rectify the situation, then such a response could be a positive sign for you to stay. On the other hand, if financial misdeeds are known and not addressed or, even worse, covered up, then that may require you to join with other believers and request appropriate authorities to investigate the situation. Your decision to leave could eventually hinge on the outcome of the investigation process and subsequent responses by fellow believers.

- **YOU SHOULD LEAVE IF:**

Known sin in the Body is neither addressed nor scripturally dealt with.

The three basic sins at the root of every transgression are clearly stated in Scripture.

1 John 2:15-17, Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For *all that is in the world*—the *desires of the flesh* and the *desires of the eyes* and *pride in possessions*—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever [*emphasis added*].

Every sin is a product of one or more of the three “root level” sins: the desires of the flesh (self-centered satisfaction of lusts), the desires of the eyes (coveting), and the pride of possessions (boastful pride of life). When an outgrowth of any root level sin characterizes a fellow believer’s behavior, then that believer is “overtaken in a fault” and other believers are to help restore such a person.

Galatians 6:1-2, Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of *gentleness*. *Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted*. *Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*.

See [True Love is Not Based on Feelings](#) and [The Habit That Makes You a People-Helper](#) on the WordTruth website.

In Galatians 6:1-2, notice that only believers “who are spiritual” are qualified for the ministry of restoration. Even though there is more to being “spiritual” than growing in love, granting forgiveness, and biblically evaluating one’s own life with a view to greater Christlikeness, these characteristics are basic to those “who are spiritual.” In the Galatians context, those “who are spiritual” live and walk in dependence on God’s Spirit and, thus, exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Galatians 5:22:23, But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Hopefully, this description is applicable to you. If so, then you are spiritually qualified to gently restore another believer, as you remain faithful in your own walk in Christ. Even though it may be difficult, believers “who are spiritual” should communicate with the one overtaken in sin and encourage this fellow believer to repent. This is the subject of Matthew 18:15-17, a passage which specifically deals with an unrepentant fellow believer.

Matthew 18:15-17, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

[The following paragraph is taken from [Communicating the Sins of Others](#) on the WordTruth website]

Note the three-step communication plan that is presented in Matthew 18:15-17. Initially, you are to communicate privately to the believer who has sinned. More than you might think, believers overtaken in a fault will begin to take steps of repentance as a result of this loving confrontation. You only bring in others when the sinning believer will not repent. Even then, only one or two other believers “who are spiritual” are to accompany you in your second attempt to try to convince a sinning believer of his need to repent.

Only after a believer fails to listen to you (with witnesses present) are you to communicate a believer’s lack of repentance to the *ekklesia*. In the context of restoring a fellow believer, the phrase “those who are spiritual” is the qualifying characteristic of those in the *church* who help to restore another. Those in the restoration group may communicate with the one who has sinned for the purpose of encouragement toward repentance. The group may also speak (and pray) with one another with regard to the progress of the restoration attempt. If the restoration process succeeds and the fallen believer confesses his sin in repentance, then those involved can give thanks to the Lord together. If the restoration process reveals a persistently unrepentant believer, then fellowship is to cease with the unrepentant believer.

Whenever it becomes necessary to deal with anything that dishonors Christ, believers can be assured of God’s strength, the sufficiency of His Word, the guidance of His Spirit, and the abiding presence of His Son to realize a God-honoring process and outcome. On the other hand, when faced with the decision to respond to the failures of fellow believers, your initial response might be to “leave” and to do so as quickly as possible. In other words, “let someone else deal with it.” Yet, by trusting God IN a difficult situation, you, along with other fellow believers, can grow in grace and faith.

See [God’s Purpose in His Children’s Trials](#) on the WordTruth website.

If believers disregard sinful behavior in the lives of fellow believers, then scriptural guidelines to restore and disciple fellow believers and maintain purity in the Body are abandoned. Additionally, when efforts are thwarted to restore fallen believers, the shepherding responsibility of leadership is neglected. Should you stay in a church or *ekklesia* that rebuffs your concerns about the lack of biblical discipline/restoration among its members? You should not.

- **YOU SHOULD LEAVE IF:**

- **You are asked to leave by leadership or by faithful Christian friends**

Some situations can develop in which you may be asked to leave a church or *ekklesia*. For example, if you were involved in adultery with another member of a church or *ekklesia*, your restoration to the Lord and to your marital companion is better served when you have no contact (visual or verbal) with a partner in adultery. During the time of complete restoration (which certainly will last for months...and, perhaps, even years), one or both participants in marital unfaithfulness may be asked to leave the church or *ekklesia*. Faithful believers in the *ekklesia* will, in all probability, be involved in the restoration process; but those guilty of adultery will no longer have unrestricted

fellowship in the church(es) or *ekklesia(s)* in which both partners in adultery once participated. This is not done as a form of punishment, but it is done to lessen the difficulty that results for all concerned when adultery has occurred between members of the same group.

Another reason you may be asked to leave involves divisiveness. If you are perceived to be a divisive person who creates schisms in the Body by teaching falsely or if you demand your own way and violate various aspects of Scripture in the process, you may be asked to depart (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10-11).

Romans 16:17, I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

Titus 3:10-11, As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

It is important to remember that an authentic believer will always be part of the universal *church*. A believer is almost always part of a local *ekklesia* as well. Believers in either of the above situations (adultery, divisiveness) who are asked to leave a church or *ekklesia* often depart and, later, in repentance and with a desire to grow in Christ, will join another *ekklesia*. This change usually helps to restore a believer to the Lord and to others in the family of God.

- **YOU SHOULD LEAVE IF:**

- **You are convinced that God is directing you to do so**

This is one area that could involve self-deception: perceiving God’s “leading” when it is actually a response to personal preferences. Before making such a decision, you should definitely consult godly believers for prayer and biblical counsel. However, with that cautionary note in mind, the following examples illustrate some of the reasons the Lord may lead you elsewhere.

- ☞ The Lord, in His sovereignty, may impress upon you to leave your current *ekklesia* in order to minister elsewhere. This new location might be in the immediate vicinity or on the other side of the world.
- ☞ The Lord may direct you to leave your current *ekklesia* for a limited time so you can invest significant time in prayer, fasting, and Bible study (perhaps in a study group/*ekklesia*). These times of spiritual growth may also include counsel from fellow believers. This time with the Lord is designed to draw you closer to the Savior and, often, to prepare you for what He will soon direct you to do. Inevitably, you will be involved in an *ekklesia* once again, sometimes in the same one that you originally left.
- ☞ Differences in doctrinal matters could precipitate your leaving a *church* to become involved in another. When leaving a *church* is due to doctrinal differences—some of which are denominational distinctives—your ability to communicate in a Christ-like manner is critical to maintain unity in the Body.

A QUICK SUMMARY OF “HOW AND WHEN TO LEAVE A CHURCH”

If you decide to leave a church:

- ☞ Determine to bring glory to God by demonstrating your love for Christ, God’s Word, and fellow believers.
- ☞ Do not make this decision alone but involve other believers in prayer and counsel.
- ☞ Do not make this decision based on personal preferences, hurt feelings, a failure to resolve relational difficulties, or a desire for “change” to make things “better” for you.
- ☞ Communicate your decision to those in your *ekklesia*, asking them to help you determine the timing and steps for you to leave. Ideally, this process should be accomplished in a spirit of unity with an understanding of how your leaving will benefit you and others in the Body of Christ.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The possibility of leaving a church or *ekklesia* will become a reality for tens of thousands of believers this year. If it happens to you or to fellow believers, remember that this is a significant decision which should have the same result as every other aspect of a believer’s life . . . to bring glory to God.

1 Corinthians 10:31-33, So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.