

LEAVING A CHURCH SHOULD BE DIFFICULT

It appears that too many Christians have no difficulty in leaving the church they have attended for several years and going to another church in the same town. They will tell you that it was not an easy decision to make, but it happens so often that it could not have been all that difficult. But leaving a church should never be easy, but always difficult, and always a last resort.

Very few churches are guilty of sheep stealing the problem is with the sheep. They are easily dissatisfied and convinced that the grass is greener in another field. It is not always wrong to leave a church, but it should be a last resort not the first option.

WHAT IS A CHURCH?

The church, wrote A. W. Tozer, 'is the temple in which the Spirit of Christ dwells, the body of which Christ is the Head, the medium through which he works for the reclamation of mankind. Individual members of the church working in harmony with each other are the lips and hands and feet of the inliving Christ. The Church is the true Shekinah, the visible habitation of the invisible God, the Bride of Christ, destined to share forever the love of his heart and the privileges of his throne.'

If Tozer's definition is correct then we should give the utmost respect to the church. It is not something to be treated lightly. It is a company of people who by nature are sinners but have been saved by the grace of God: 'Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst' (1 Tim. 1: 15).

The church, then, is people, God's people, and what we are being told in 1 Timothy is how to conduct ourselves when we come together as Christians. We are a redeemed people, but we are not a perfect people and, therefore, there are often many problems in the church. Most of Paul's letters in the New Testament were written to deal with church problems. Problems in a church are not exceptional-the devil will see to that, but no Christian has the right to absent himself from church attendance because he wants to avoid hassle. Some Christians are far too sensitive about their own feelings and position, and they need the hurly-burly of church life to humble them and remind them that they are not the only Christians with feelings. Hassle can be good for our sanctification as it throws us more and more upon the Lord for grace, patience and understanding. This does not justify tension between believers, but learning how to deal with tensions in a Christ honouring way can promote a real growth in grace. Christians need the church for its problems as well as its blessings.

EXPECTATIONS

The list of what Christians expect from a local church could be endless but two things need always to be present. The preaching needs to be biblical and feed your soul. It may not be the best of preaching in that it is not as powerful as some but so long as it is true to the scriptures then your soul will grow on it. Not every church can have outstanding ministry but as Dr Lloyd-Jones said "I can forgive a preacher most things as long as he warms my heart towards Christ".

The fellowship of the church needs to be warm and caring. Fellowship is not a matter of a

few Christians talking together about the weather, their holidays, or engaging in social chit – chat. This, of course, can be quite enjoyable and there is no harm in Christians having fun together. But the uniqueness of Christian fellowship consists in being able to talk about and share together the joys, blessings and problems of our faith.

Fellowship is like the spokes of a wheel. The closer the spokes are to the hub, the closer they are to each other. The further away they are from the hub, the further they are from each other. In the same way, the closer you are to the Lord, the closer you will be to other believers. The more you enjoy fellowship with Christ, the more you will enjoy the fellowship of his people.

If your church has these two things you should be able to put up with what it does not have.

FOOD AND FREEDOM

In my first church five of the members began to attend a Pentecostal church in the evening. These were good people and their action disturbed me. When I spoke to them about it they said that they greatly appreciated the preaching and valued it as food for their souls, but the worship they found stifling so they went to the Pentecostal church for freedom.

We talked about food and freedom and which was the most important. They wanted both but they would not get both in our town. I warned them that sooner or later they would have to make a choice. They did and left us altogether. Soon after, I left to take up another pastorate. I returned for the induction of the new pastor and Derek Swann was preaching in the induction service. After the service one of the five came up to me and with tears in his eyes said that I had been right in warning them not to leave. He said, “I have not heard preaching like we had today since I left this church”. I replied, “Well you know what you must do”.

It is one thing to leave a church and it is quite another to go back. I greatly admired this man because he wrote to the deacons apologizing for leaving and asking if they would have him back. That was not easy but it was right.

If the preaching in your church is not biblical, then look for somewhere else to worship. If it is, then value it and even though other aspects of church life may not be to your liking put up with these and seek to change them as and when you can.