

## **CHAPTER 20**

### **HOW TO DECIDE WHETHER TO LEAVE A CHURCH OR TO STAY AND FIGHT TO CHANGE IT**

*<sup>24</sup> and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

*Hebrews 10:24-25 (RSV)*

*<sup>17</sup> Therefore come out from them,  
and be separate from them, says the Lord,  
and touch nothing unclean;  
then I will welcome you,  
2 Corinthians 6:17 (RSV)*

*<sup>14</sup> The Lord enters into judgment  
with the elders and princes of his people:  
“It is you who have devoured the vineyard,  
the spoil of the poor is in your houses.  
Isaiah 3:14 (RSV)*

*<sup>20</sup> Woe to those who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter!  
Isaiah 5:20 (RSV)*

*<sup>11</sup> Depart, depart, go out from there;  
touch no unclean thing;  
go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves,  
you who bear the vessels of the Lord.  
Isaiah 52:11 (ESV)*

**Whether to stay and fight the wicked within a church, or to leave and start again elsewhere, depends on all the circumstances of each particular case.**

We now turn to the complex issue of whether to stay and fight to save your church from evil-doers and false teachers, or to leave and go elsewhere, or even start a new church yourself. There is no short answer. It depends on a wide range of factors. As Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, there is a time for everything. There is therefore a time to leave a church and a time to stay, a time to give up on it and a time to fight for it. Wisdom consists of being able to ‘tell the time’, so as to know which option to choose in your particular circumstances.

Over the years I have been in various situations, each of which called for a different response. Sometimes I judged it correctly and sometimes I got it wrong. However, my mistakes have mainly been in the direction of staying in churches for *too long* and not realising that it was pointless to keep on fighting. That was the case in Rick’s church. It took me two years to get out from the point when I first saw the problems. I spent one year gradually realising the scale of the crisis, and then another year trying to change things, before I realised I was getting nowhere and achieving nothing.

It was all entirely futile. I was just allowing myself and my family to be damaged and undermined. A lot of mental, emotional and spiritual harm can be caused by a long, drawn out fight to save a church. There is also the fact that during all that time, the church is likely to be a hostile, chaotic war zone. Therefore it is not a place where you or your family can thrive and grow. Your decision to stay and fight may just delay the point at which you can ‘escape’ and move to a better church, where your family can be fed and have healthy relationships.

**Don’t fight merely to keep the ownership or control of a church building, or a church name, or responsibility for paid staff.**

If the fight is over material things, such as the church building, you would usually be better off letting the other group have it. I have heard of situations where both sides want the building, especially if it is picturesque and popular for weddings. If that is your aim I strongly recommend you think again. It is better to let the other group have it, as that is not an important issue of doctrine or morals and is not worth fighting over. Why would you want the building anyway? It is more likely to be a hindrance than a help.

Two things devour the finances of most churches and prevent them doing what they are meant to do. Those are buying and maintaining the building and paying the wages of the staff. Far from being important, neither of these are even biblical. New Testament churches did not have any special buildings or ‘clergy’. They all met in homes or in barns or farm out-buildings, and were led by unpaid local elders. So, why fight for the ‘privilege’ of keeping the building, or the paid staff, when those are part of the problem, not its solution?

**In a battle over the leadership or direction of a church, calculate realistically how many people are with you and how many are with the wicked.**

In any battle you first need to count the likely cost of the fight, how long it may take, and how much damage will be caused. You also have to work out, realistically, how many people are with you and how many are with the wrongdoers, or with those who are teaching false doctrine or engaging in unbiblical or sinful practices. If there is a church of 100 people and only a few wrongdoers, especially if they are *not leaders*, it is probably right to stay and fight to save that church. That may still be so even if you are the only person who can see the nature and gravity of the problem.

It would be even more appropriate to stay if there are a number of you who can all see what is going on, and you are all willing to fight. But if there are 100 people in the church, and 20-30 of them are behaving wrongly and/or teaching false doctrine, you may be wasting your time trying to fight for that church, especially if that group includes some or all of the *leadership*. Much will depend on the nature of the other 70-80 people. If they include enough sensible, brave, committed people, who are willing to speak up and help you tackle the wrongdoers, there could be a way forward.

Realistically, the vast majority of Christians are followers, not leaders. Also, most are weak, passive and cowardly and are not willing to take any risks or put themselves in the line of fire. Thus, even if there are 70-80 people who are not involved in the wrongdoing or heresy, most of them will just want to keep their heads down. So, they may not actively oppose you, but you can’t expect any support from them either. When I tried to tackle Rick the church had about 300 people, but only a handful were willing to help me. Even of that few, none were willing to help me *publicly*.

They wouldn’t stand up and be openly identified as challenging Rick and supporting me. So, it was not a fight between 300 people. It was really just a fight between me on one side and about ten leaders on the other. The other 290 were silent, passive bystanders. Most were completely unaware of what was going on anyway, because I was very confidential and did not inform them. A few were aware, but

they chose to keep well out of it. As for the 290 members to whom I had not spoken, the only information they ever got came from Rick and the other leaders.

The leaders were actively maligning me and seeking to turn people against me with lies and smears. While they were doing that I was being extremely discreet and restrained. Therefore most of the church members only got to hear Rick's side of the story, and the things said by those who were backing him. Unsurprisingly, I got nowhere in trying to tackle Rick. In those days I didn't know even a fraction of what I now know about how to handle the wicked. If I faced the same situation today, I would have got out of that church much earlier, without bothering to fight any battles.

I probably wouldn't even try to challenge anybody to get them to see their sin and repent. I would now know that attempting those things is futile if you are dealing with people whose *character and sinful behaviour* are the problem. Such people do not want to be challenged or corrected and will attack you if you try. The position would be very different if the argument was purely over doctrine or practice and was being conducted against honest men of good character.

Godly men, who are simply mistaken or misinformed in their theology, will be open to hear you. They will also be willing to alter their beliefs or practices if you can show them to be wrong. Sadly, such people are rare, even in the leadership of churches. Moreover, they are unlikely ever to be a problem to you in the first place. Nonetheless, I raise the theoretical possibility, for completeness, as such a situation may occasionally arise.

**If you are in the minority and can't win, it is almost always best to leave the church without a fight.**

If you and your group are in the minority, and especially if the 'other side' consists of some or all of the leaders, then just quietly leave that church. You will avoid a lot of damage to yourself and your family and increase the chances of finding a better church elsewhere and of doing so sooner. That is what we did in four other churches that we left. We knew we could not change the hearts or minds of the leaders because they were autocratic 'rulers' who dominated those churches. I could also see each time that the congregation were not aware of how they were being abused.

Many church members actually like being ruled over and would not be willing to break free, even if the facts were explained to them. At any rate, whereas we were damaged by our departure from Rick's church, the way we left those other four churches was much less eventful. We got out without much damage although I did take a wealth of stories for this book. I believe that is one reason why God permitted us to get involved with those churches in the first place. I wasn't able to help them, and they couldn't help me, but our time in each of them gave me material for this book.

**However, in the unlikely event that you are in the majority and the wicked are in the minority, then it may be worth fighting for that church.**

Looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight, I can think of only one occasion, in three decades, when the right thing to do was to stay in a church and 'fight'. When we joined that church there was a large group of devious, malicious people in it, even though it was small. I was not aware of them at the start, but I could see that there were problems, and more problems emerged as the months went by. However, what was unusual about that church was that there were two other couples in it who were sincere, biblically-sound and willing to take a stand alongside us.

Their solidarity made all the difference even though, in the beginning, the wrongdoers outnumbered us. What was even more unusual was that, instead of the godly people being driven out, the wicked ones began to leave, one by one, and couple by couple. In the end, about 20 of them had gone. That profoundly altered the balance of power. The sincere, right-thinking element were then in the majority,

because Rhoda and Stephen and many others like them had left. We reached the point where just one couple, Philip and Sonia, were still a major problem.

However, their misconduct mattered more than it ordinarily would because Philip was an elder and we could see no sign of them choosing to leave. Neither could we see any realistic possibility of them repenting or changing. The stark choice we faced was either to expel them, or for us to leave instead. So, together with the two godly couples, we decided we would not even attempt to confront Philip and Sonia, or to remove Philip as an elder. We chose just to leave quietly, and we did so without consulting any other members.

We did not wish to gossip or to give anyone any basis for accusing us of doing so. However, as soon as we left to form a new church, most of the other members said they wanted to come with us, rather than stay with Philip and Sonia. That was not because we had lobbied them. On the contrary, we didn't even tell them we had left. Philip did so himself by sending out an email, on the very evening that we told him we were leaving. To his great surprise, most chose to come with us, rather than stay with him.

The point is those people freely chose to leave that church and come with us and were not persuaded to do so. Therefore, we got there in the end, albeit by an unusual route. It is rare for the wicked to leave a church voluntarily, as Stephen, Rhoda and others did. They usually have to be tackled head on and expelled, or else they won't go. It is also unusual for the wicked not to combine together, to drive out the godly.

The norm is for the wicked to join with others and to fight hard, as a group, to protect their own interests. However, for some reason, on that occasion they did not, or at least not for long. Most of them just left, in quick succession, without a fight. I believe God brought it about, because it was such an unusual sequence of events. However, at a natural level, it was also because of the kind of people who were in leadership in that church.

When we first joined that church I was not an elder. There was one main leader who had begun the church about ten years before and his main focus was on teaching. However, about four months after I joined, it emerged that he was leaving to work abroad. There were no other people in that church with a teaching ministry at that time. Therefore, although I had only joined recently, and was not an elder, I was asked to take over the teaching.

So, there were just over 30 people in the church with four elders, three of whom were weak, cowardly or wicked. However, what was unusual was that one of the elders, Ted, the one who *did the most work*, was a godly man. So was his wife. Also, one of the younger men, Charles, although not an elder, was equally godly and sincere. He was very active too. He therefore did far more of the actual work, and was more of a real leader, in practical terms, than three of the elders were. Therefore an unusual situation arose, which you don't often see in church disputes.

Ordinarily, the entire leadership has become corrupt and there is no way of defeating them or getting them out. However, on this occasion, three of the four elders were either useless or wicked. But, on our side, we had one elder who was godly, plus myself and Charles. He and I were de facto leaders, and did the work of leaders, even though we were not elders. Therefore, whereas it would ordinarily have been a walkover and the wicked would have driven us out, they had a fight on their hands.

The godly elder, Ted, had been on the brink of leaving that church in the past. But somehow he had stayed. Therefore he was in place, and was able *and willing* to help me, when the conflict began. That is very unusual. What is more, Charles was more hard-working, talented and effective than the three elders who were a problem. So, in practical terms, it was Ted, Charles and me against the other three elders. That made it three against three, which meant we had a realistic chance of succeeding. Thus it was worthwhile standing our ground.

Over about a year, various events occurred, some of which I have written about above. For example, ‘Rhoda’ told lies about Charles. When she did, the other elders, with the exception of Ted, were of no use in tackling her. Then one of the three ineffectual elders suddenly left the church, not long after Rhoda and Stephen left. That was helpful and tilted the balance of power further in our favour. It meant we now faced only two elders, and a reduced number of supporters. Moreover, one of those elders, ‘Gareth’ was elderly and did not always attend anyway.

The battle lines were such that the only effective opposition we now had to face was from ‘Philip’ and his evil wife ‘Sonia’, plus a few of their supporters. I believe they knew they did not have enough power, or numbers, to defeat us. That didn’t stop them from opposing and undermining us. But it did mean they could not drive us out, or completely alienate us, as such cliques usually can. Their practical problem was that I was doing most of the teaching and Ted and Charles were doing most of the hands on work of running the church. So they were not in a strong position.

Despite the steady departure of hostile people, there were still some left. That is why we concluded that Ted, Charles and I, plus our wives, should leave and let Philip and Sonia keep the venue, the name and whoever wanted to stay with them. We were willing, if need be, to start a new church from scratch, with just the six of us. That willingness to leave and begin again took away the need for us to tackle the hostile people head on. It also meant we did not need to expel Philip and Sonia.

If the church had been larger, but all other factors had been the same, it may have been right to have a confrontation. But we felt there was nothing to gain from it in the circumstances. We had no desire to *persuade* anybody to come with us either. We only wanted those who *wanted* to come of their own accord, and genuinely shared our values and vision. So many problems can be avoided if you are content for your church to be as small as God wants it to be. If you can accept that, and be relaxed and happy about it, then you don’t need to strive and it avoids many pointless battles.

You need to resolve that you only want the sincere, genuine people who want to be with you and who share your aims, values and approach. There is no point persuading people to come with you, or stay with you, if they don’t, or if they are worldly and carnal. Such people would only destroy your new church anyway, and so you are actually far better off if they *don’t* come with you. Recognising that fact is vitally important. It makes it possible to achieve a real breakthrough, such that you seek to build a *genuine and godly* church, not a large or impressive-looking one.

**If the leader or leadership team of a church are abusive or controlling, or are teaching false doctrines, it is usually best to leave quickly, without any confrontation or fight.**

We must distinguish between situations where there is wickedness in the *leaders* of a church and those where it is found in its *members*. If the leaders are abusive, controlling, manipulative or deceitful, or if they are teaching false doctrines, it is best just to get out quickly. Go voluntarily, without a fight, before they can do you any more harm. I say ‘any more’ because, by the time you wake up and discern their real nature, you will probably have already been damaged by them, whether you know it or not.

Also, if the wickedness is amongst the leaders, the chances of persuading them to repent are very small indeed. I have never yet succeeded in getting any leader to change, or even to listen to my warnings. Neither has anybody else that I know who has ever tried to correct one. In fact, I have never seen any kind of happy ending to such a situation. By the time the ‘rot’ has become visible to you, it is probably too far gone to be remedied. Someone should have tackled that leader years earlier, when he was still able to hear and repent.

But the likelihood is that nobody ever did, or else they didn’t succeed. Therefore, it will now be far too late for you to put things right in that leader’s life. So, just leave quietly, without any attempt to change the nature of the church, or its leadership team. They have set out their stall for how they want to lead.

They aren't going to change their ways just because you or your group say they should. They are far more likely to deal with it by attacking those who challenge them.

They will not face up to the issues, whether personal or doctrinal. Instead, they will turn on you and either remove you or undermine you. Then the difficulty is brought to an end, at least from their perspective. If you can't see this, or won't accept it, and you attempt to save that church from disaster, you are overwhelmingly likely to fail. You are also likely to get damaged in the process, as the leader fights to defend his ministry, income, power and control.

I have been involved in, or have been told of, many such fights within churches. They almost always become dirty, and from an early stage. Therefore, be wise and realistic. Just slip away and look for a more biblical church elsewhere, if there is one. If not, start one yourself. Try to be open-minded to that. Many people think it is impossible, or illegitimate, for them to start a church. They have been conditioned, over many years, to think that a church must:

- a) have a special building in the traditional format, with rows of seats and a pulpit
- b) employ a paid leader
- c) have a lot of members
- d) be part of a wider denomination
- e) have 'permission' from some person or group in order to be 'allowed' to set up a new church
- f) be 'under the authority' or 'covering' of some person or group, so as to have 'legitimacy'

Those unbiblical ideas have been programmed into most of us and have become part of our 'software'. They create a perception of insurmountable obstacles, such that starting a new church with a small group of friends is felt to be impossible. People have also been taught to think that even if they could do it, it would be "*illegitimate*" and "*not a proper church*". It is actually the other way round. The churches in the book of Acts and the New Testament letters were all *small, local, independent and self-governing*. They also all *met in homes, barns or the like*.

None of the points in (a) – (f) above applied to any of the churches that the apostles set up. Therefore, don't be put off or feel disqualified by any such ideas. Don't be persuaded to think that you and your little cluster of friends and relatives can't start a valid church. You *can*, and it may well be exactly what God wants you to do. At any rate, it is far better than:

- a) staying 'under' abusive leaders, or
- b) moving elsewhere to another unbiblical, traditional, hierarchical, clergy-minded church, only to be ruled and controlled by other men who think and act exactly like your current leader(s).

However, what if your current leaders are godly men, teaching true doctrine? What if it is *they* who are being attacked by a wicked person or group within the *membership*? Even if it is a large group opposing them, it may well be right to stay and fight to defend such leaders from them. The difference is that, in such a situation, you have at least a realistic prospect of success. Indeed, your willingness to stay and fight, and to support such a leader, may well be a decisive factor in enabling him to turn that church around.

It may enable him to overcome those who are behaving wickedly, seeking to undermine him, or trying to divert the church onto a wrong path. In that minority of cases (in the West) where a church has godly leaders, the demons will do everything they can to raise up carnal, worldly people from within that church to undermine him. Your willingness to stand alongside such a man, or men, and to take flak for doing so, may make all the difference and enable a good church to survive.

It can take a lot of wisdom and discernment to tell the difference between situations where godly members are confronting ungodly leaders, and those where ungodly members are undermining godly leaders. In the eyes of a naïve, undiscerning church member, the former is frequently mistaken for the latter. That is why, if you do ever try to tackle an ungodly leader, even the decent, honest, members of that church may well oppose you and think they are doing God's will and that you are opposing God's will.

That is simply the way it is, because the level of discernment is so incredibly low in most churches. Accordingly, there is no 'one size fits all' solution to these problems. You will need to pause, pray, think hard, and take advice from *mature* Christians, both within and outside of your church. All of those steps are needed to maximise the chances of your making the right judgment about who is right and wrong, and what you need to do about it. If you imagine the answer is always clear and obvious you are badly mistaken.

Therefore approach any such case carefully with a lot of prayer, a keen eye and an open mind. Also be willing to see things which you might prefer to believe were not happening. Otherwise, you are asking to be deceived and/or to misdiagnose what is going on. The most common 'solution', which most concerned church members opt for, is neither to fight nor leave. They just accept the status quo and passively remain in an unbiblical, badly-led, badly-taught 'Nicolaitan' church. They cannot make up their minds what to do, or they lack the courage to do it.

Therefore they compromise and tolerate wrong conduct or false teaching on the basis that "There's nothing we can do about it" or "It would be just the same if we moved somewhere else" or "We aren't qualified to start a new church ourselves". Whatever their reasons may be, they end up staying too long, or even forever, financing the ministries of hirelings and even wolves. Such men ought not to be leading churches at all, let alone being supported by you in doing so.

If more people had the discernment, and the courage, to leave such men, and to withdraw their financial support, the apostate churches would evaporate away and disappear. It is from the godliest members, who are also the most likely to be concerned, that most of the financial support comes. Therefore we need to stop propping up unbiblical, false, worldly men who are leading '*Ichabod churches*', from which the glory of God has long since departed, if indeed it was ever there.

### **What about a church which isn't doing anything specifically wicked, but which simply has an unbiblical, hierarchical structure, which you would like to try to change?**

What if you are in a church which isn't doing anything particularly wicked, but is simply unbiblical and hierarchical? What if it is clergy-minded and is following man-made traditions for church practice and structure? Someone I spoke to recently was in that situation and asked me what they ought to do. If you are unclear as to what I mean by the above terms, please refer to my Book 8, in which I closely examine what a biblical church is meant to be and what the early Church did, as compared to what most churches do today.

My advice was that he should simply leave quietly, without any fight, and start a small biblical church himself, with a handful of other like-minded people. I said that if a church is based on the traditional model, it will not want to change and he would not be able to persuade it that it ought to. If you try to change them, the people in that church will probably have no idea what you are talking about. Therefore, it is futile to start agitating about how the structure and practices of that church are unbiblical. You will not be understood.

It will be assumed that you are a trouble-maker, obsessed with obscure issues. That is virtually inevitable, because those people will have known nothing else, ever since they became Christians, or even since they were children. They then become the equivalent of domestic pets, who have no idea how to feed themselves and need to be looked after by a 'master' who provides everything for them.

People won't like it if you suggest that their systems, traditions and structures, are the very opposite of what they should be, and that they need to be reversed.

They will feel very threatened if you say every member ought to be capable of "feeding himself" and of helping to disciple others. People have no desire to make major changes, or become independent-minded, at least not as groups. Most will panic at the idea, just as a pet dog would if you turned it loose and left it to forage and hunt for itself. Individuals may possibly grasp what you are talking about, especially if they have no church background, but not a whole group, simultaneously. Thus they are likely to lash out at you if you make any such proposals.

The leaders will be particularly threatened by any talk of adopting a biblical structure and of imitating the practices of the first century church. Their incomes, homes and pensions depend on the continuance of the traditional unbiblical system, and turkeys don't vote for Christmas. So, even if such leaders don't normally behave aggressively, they will make an exception in your case, to protect themselves from your 'radical' views. Therefore, if your own eyes have opened, so that you can see the errors of the traditional church model, just come out of it quietly.

Then either search for a biblical church elsewhere and join it, or start one yourself. Don't seek to bring people with you, unless they are very close friends of yours who know your views and *share your convictions*. Just leave as graciously as you can, keeping as many relationships intact as possible. Remember that God will judge you for the *manner of your departure*. So don't do or say anything carnal or which would dishonour Him or damage other people in the church.

Leave in such a way that God can reward you for your integrity and self-control. The success or failure of your new biblical house church will partly depend on *the manner in which you form it*. Therefore make sure you set it up in a way that both you and God can be proud of. Don't do anything aggressive, underhand or nasty, and don't attack or malign others. Never go against your own conscience. Behave in a 'squeaky clean' way at all times, even if it means fewer people come with you.

It is actually better for them not to come if any ungodly behaviour is required in order to attract or retain them. They would not be the kind of people you need to start a biblical church anyway. Therefore, focus on trying to reach out to the sincere and godly, *however few those may be*. To return to the original point, organisations do not like to change. They are more set in their ways than individuals are. That is particularly true of churches, as they tend to be even more rooted in tradition, with settled habits and expectations. Any attempt to change those is likely to be doomed.

**We need to distinguish situations involving heresy or wickedness from the everyday problems that Christians have, and the errors they make, as they learn to be disciples.**

We have been looking at situations where church leaders or members are manipulative or otherwise wicked, or where false doctrine is taught, such that you need to get out, or fight to save the church. However, we have to distinguish such cases from those where immature, misguided, misinformed or uninformed people are causing problems, but are not wicked. Such immaturity, and even carnality, is to be expected in churches, especially from new believers, as they learn how to be disciples.

We need not leave a church merely because some of the members have problems or weaknesses, even at a severe level. What those people need is for mature Christians to get alongside them, set an example, and help them to grow and change. So, in speaking of whether and when to leave a church, I am not referring to those immature or carnal people, provided they are *not in leadership*. But if they are leaders, that changes everything. You cannot consent to be led by such men.

However, what if they are not leaders, but are numerous, or their behaviour is serious, and the leaders are *doing nothing about it*? That could make it necessary for you to leave. Such carnal behaviour, if left unchallenged by the leaders, could spread throughout the church, especially to the young people.

So, if you have children, you may need to leave in order to protect them from the unwholesome influence of those others, even if they are not yet wicked and are only carnal and immature.