



# HOW TO LEAVE A CHURCH WELL

By Jeff Helton



# STUDY THE HEART

To leave a church well, both as a minister and a family, you must start with the internal belief that God redeems everything. God takes both the beautiful accomplishments and the garbage of your life, to grow you and use it for His glory.

As ministers and followers of Christ, we must decide if the worst moments--whether it is a mistake or an unfortunate or hurtful situation--can be used by God in His ultimate work. Before you leave a church position, ask, *"Okay God, can I trust that you're bigger than what's happened?"*

One of the great sorrows in ministry is the number of pastors and ministers who leave their Church angry. They exit their church position with a story that speaks of how the system has victimized them.

Please don't misunderstand. There are situations in which pastors or ministers are hurt, harmed, victimized, and tormented by congregants,

boards, or other staff members. Even in those situations, it's imperative in your inner heart world, that you can trust God to be bigger than the current circumstance. He is up to something, and His love cannot be thwarted by what you have just endured.

In those difficult moments, it is good to pause and gain an eternal perspective. The old camp meeting song of my southeast Tennessee youth says, "This world is not my home. I'm just a passing through it." I love those lyrics, and it reminds me there is something bigger going on than my involvement in a difficult situation.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we put on rose-colored glasses or assume a Pollyanna mentality. I'm talking about embracing the eternal reality that God is genuinely redeeming in character, and He is up to something in your life and the lives of your loved ones.



# SPEAK WISELY




Leaving a church position requires you, as a minister, to speak the truth. However, speaking the truth in *concentric circles* is critical. In other words, talk about the facts only where it applies.

There was a situation in a previous Church when I chose to leave because of some discord with a group of fellow leaders, called elders within our Church culture. I met with them to share how I saw the situation and my perception of their understanding of the situation. It resulted in an impasse. Because we were unable to agree on the circumstance, it was time for me to leave.

I intentionally spoke the truth in regards to their decision. They respectfully understood it and heard it, but it was still time for me to move on. I practiced honesty within the circle in which it applied.

When it was time to speak to the whole Church body--who had not been part of those conversations-- I chose not to speak out. I believed that talking to the entire Church would only create more discord rather than promote health. The situation was not about illegal or unethical behavior, but rather about preferred behavior.

Preferential behavior triggers a lot of departures by a boss or an employee. When the discord or conflict is preferential, such as a change in the style of worship or change in direction by the leadership, be very direct with those whom you have had discussions. However, when addressing the Church body, continue to shepherd as you leave and speak in broader generalities to eliminate any possibility for discord.



# SEPARATE THE ISSUES

One wise component of leaving well is to discern the difference between WHY you are leaving versus WHO you are leaving. Often, ministers or pastors combine these two issues.

When you can't separate the issues, you can leave and feel mad at the other person and entertain thoughts such as, *"I can't believe he or she did this to me."*

A better way of thinking through the situation is to say, *"He or she is in the new leadership role. They want to go a different direction with student ministry, which is their prerogative."*

So often, I see a new pastor or staff member come to town and change the philosophy of ministry. The other staff members have an old way of doing activities or events, so the new leadership no longer fits. The temptation is to personalize the change and believe there's something defective about you.

I regularly use a metaphor with my clients. As a staff member, you are like a wide receiver for a football team. You are an outstanding wide receiver, and you make a difference in your role on the Church team.

Then a new senior pastor comes in (or a new boss) and announces, *"Hey, I don't really like football. I don't think football is the most effective way for us to be the Church. I'm going to go play baseball."*

Suddenly, if you're not careful, you become the guy standing in right field wearing shoulder pads and a football helmet. At some point, you must realize that the culture and philosophy of ministry has shifted, and you no longer fit. Football is still a good sport, but you need to go to another church if you want to continue playing.

When you have that kind of broader perspective, you can leave and understand, *"Hey, there's no longer a fit for me in this place."*



# STAY STEADY



When you transition churches, you have to be confident in what God has called you to in ministry. This belief is foundational. For example, God may have called you to ministry in a particular city and state for a season.

Now, for whatever reason, the situation has changed. And although the location or home address may have changed, the calling didn't change. It evolved.

When you can differentiate between the two and embrace that difference, you can stay faithful to your overall calling, which helps you leave a church well.

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