

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

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When should an evangelical Christian separate from a church? That question is asked often these days, and it betrays more than one problem in contemporary Christianity. Far too many church members have become church shoppers. The biblical concept of ecclesiology has given way to a form of consumerism in which individuals shop around for the church that seems most to their liking at that moment. The issue can concern worship and music, relationships, teaching, or any number of other things. The pattern is the same, however – people feel free to leave one congregation for another for virtually any reason, or no reason at all.

Church shopping violates the integrity of the church and the meaning of church membership. When members leave for insufficient reason, the fellowship of the church is broken, its witness is weakened, and the peace and unity of the congregation are sacrificed. Tragically, a superficial understanding of church membership undermines our witness to the gospel of Christ.

There is no excuse for this phenomenon. We have no right to leave a church over preferences about music, personal taste, or even programming that does not meet expectations. These controversies or concerns should prompt the faithful Christian to consider how he might be of assistance in finding and forging a better way, rather than working to find an excuse to leave.

Christians cannot look to this question as merely a matter of consumerism. We are called to love the church and to pray for its peace and unity, not to look for an opportunity to move to another congregation.

There are times, however, when it is right to separate from a congregation or denomination. But in such a case, the issue is not taste but theology.

No congregation or denomination is perfect, and doctrinal conversations are often a sign of congregational health. The question of separation from a church should arise only when a matter of urgent theological significance is at stake — when it would violate both integrity and gospel witness to stay.

In the end, the only sufficient reason for separating from a church is theological. A faithful Christian must separate from a congregation or denomination when that body obstinately rejects efforts at doctrinal correction over an issue of true significance.

That said, the difficulty comes in the terms of this assertion. The history of the Christian church includes a few thrilling and encouraging accounts of congregations, denominations, and Christian institutions that, once committed to aberrant doctrine or outright heresy, were later convinced of their error and corrected by the Bible.

Sadly, there is a vastly larger list of churches and denominations that have refused and rejected all attempts at correction. Once committed to a trajectory of doctrinal error and heresy, many churches are completely resistant to correction by the Word of God.

The first hard issue we face lies in defining what kind of doctrinal issue merits this urgency. This requires a structure of careful theological analysis rooted in a serious consideration of which issues are of greatest importance — false teachings and beliefs that would, if obstinately held, require separation.

Christians today face the daunting task of strategizing which Christian doctrines and theological issues are to be given highest priority in terms of our contemporary context. This applies both to the public defense of Christianity in face of the secular challenge and to the internal responsibility of dealing with doctrinal disagreements. Neither is an easy task, but theological seriousness and maturity demand that we consider doctrinal issues in terms of their relative importance. God's truth is to be defended at every point and in every detail, but responsible Christians must determine which issues deserve first-rank attention in a time of theological crisis.

I have long argued for what I call a structure of theological triage. I first encountered this concept in a hospital emergency room. There is observed the process of medical triage. This process allows trained personnel to make a quick evaluation of relative medical urgency. Given the chaos of an emergency room reception area, someone must be armed with the medical expertise to make an immediate determination of medical priority. Which patients should be rushed into surgery? Which patients can wait for a less urgent examination? Medical personnel cannot flinch from asking these

questions and from taking responsibility to give the patients with the most critical needs top priority in terms of treatment.

The word triage comes from the French word trier, which means “to sort.” The same discipline that brings order to the hectic arena of the emergency room can also offer great assistance to Christians defending truth in the present age. We must learn to sort theological and doctrinal issues as part of our Christian responsibility.

With this in mind, I would suggest three different levels of theological urgency, each corresponding to a set of issues and theological priorities found in current doctrinal debates.

First-level theological issues would include those doctrines most central and essential to the Christian faith. Included among these most crucial doctrines would be doctrines such as the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith alone, and the authority of Scripture. These first-order doctrines represent the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith, and a denial of these doctrines represents nothing less than an eventual denial of Christianity itself.

Without an affirmation of the Trinity, there is no true Christianity. Without an affirmation of the full deity and humanity of Christ, there is no gospel. Without an affirmation of doctrines essential to the gospel of Christ, there is no saving message in Christianity at all.

These first-order doctrines would include the virgin birth of Christ, His bodily resurrection, and other doctrines clearly taught in the Bible and necessary to understanding who Christ is and what His atonement accomplished. Thus, justification by faith alone is also rightly categorized in this first-order rank, for without this truth the church falls.

The set of second-order doctrines is distinguished from the first-order set by the fact that believing Christians may disagree on the second-order issues, though this disagreement will create significant boundaries between believers. When Christians organize themselves into congregations and denominational forms, these boundaries become evident.

Second-order issues would include the meaning and mode of baptism. Baptists and Presbyterians, for example, fervently disagree over the most basic understanding of Christian baptism. The practice of infant baptism is

inconceivable to the Baptist mind, while Presbyterians trace infant baptism to their most basic understanding of the covenant. Standing together on the first-order doctrines, Baptists and Presbyterians eagerly recognize each other as believing Christians, but recognize that disagreement on issues of this importance will prevent fellowship within the same congregation or denomination.

First-order issues determine Christian identity and integrity. Second-order issues determine ecclesiology.

Third-order issues are doctrines over which Christians may disagree and remain in close fellowship, even within local congregations. I would put most of the debates over eschatology, for example, in this category. Christians who affirm the bodily, historical, and victorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ may differ over timetable and sequence without rupturing the fellowship of the church. Christians may find themselves in disagreement over any number of issues related to the interpretation of difficult texts or the understanding of matters of common disagreement. Nevertheless, standing together on issues of more urgent importance, believers are able to accept one another without compromise when third-order issues are in question.

Christians should never separate from a church over third-order issues, much less over issues that do not even rise to this importance. Believers in Christ are obligated to see all issues of biblical truth as included in our stewardship of the gospel, but the New Testament makes clear that, while unity on essentials is vital, diversity on other questions need not threaten the unity of the church.

In our day, issues such as homosexuality and women in the pastorate represent issues that strain our attempts at triage. A rejection of the Bible's authority on an issue such as homosexuality is a theological problem — not merely a moral controversy. No church can remain divided on this question, and no faithful believer should remain in a church that refuses to be bound to God's Word. A church that ordains women as pastors may be orthodox on many other issues, but on this question it sets itself against Scripture.

In so many churches and denominations, this obstinate refusal to be corrected by Scripture presents faithful believers with a hard choice — but remaining in a church that obstinately refuses correction is not an option. Efforts at “renewal” in many of these churches have been consistently

rejected. At some point, the refusal to separate becomes complicity in the heresy.

These are hard questions indeed, but the serious believer must use extreme care in considering when to stay and when to go. In the end, the deciding issue must be truth, and the decision must be made with prayer, heartbreak, and resolve.