

Doctrine of Pastoral Transitions

Pastoral Transitions: Going and Coming

Every minister I know started out the same way and that was with high hopes, and great expectations. Then came the reality that the work of a pastor is a very difficult task, and impossible to accomplish apart from Divine enablement. The statistics tell the sad story. Men are moving from ministry to ministry, at a rapid rate. Many ministers are concerned about how to make a decision to make a transition. There are valid reasons for wanting to leave a church, and there are good reasons for not leaving a ministry.

Biblical Reasons to not Leaving a Ministry

1. Do not leave a ministry simply because there are new demands that are a challenge to face. There are several reasons for staying in a challenging situation.
 - The church must be set in order. *Titus 1:5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:*
 - Sound doctrine must be established. *Titus 1:9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*
 - The mouths of some must be stopped. *Titus 1:11 Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.*
2. Do not leave a ministry simply because feelings of discouragement are overwhelming the soul. Elijah became discouraged, and apparently so did Timothy.
 - *2 Timothy 2:3 Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. 4 No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. 5 And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully. 6 The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits. 7 Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.*
3. Do not leave a ministry simply because you want to “move on”. Remember the following.
 - The church family needs love and stability, and building people takes time, and time involves practicing the principles of 1 Corinthians 13.
 - Missionaries need a sense of identity and permanence in their home church.

- A faithful pastor, and a stable ministry serve the community better than a church in constant turmoil, and pastoral movement.
- The support of Elders, and Deacons, and other church leaders, comes gradually. Titles, degrees, and education mean precious little in the real world.
- People deserve better than to have a pastor move on without a compelling reason, especially if a congregation has been generous. No one likes to feel used.
- Confession, and forgiveness, is really easier and better, than being "right" and moving on.
- God can still be trusted to establish you in the work He has called you to do.

Biblical Reasons to Leave a Church

4. While a minister should not leave a church too quickly, there are some good Biblical reasons to leave. The following thoughts are based on why the Lord left the seven churches of the Revelation.

- It is time to leave a congregation when the people love other things more than Jesus, as happened in Ephesus.

Revelation 2:4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. 5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

- It is time to leave a congregation when there is such a loss of faith the assembly is characterized as a synagogue of Satan. In such an assembly, good works become fleshly works. The church in Smyrna was turned into a synagogue of Satan.

Revelation 2:9 I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

- It is time to leave a congregation when there is a movement towards false doctrine. The church in Pergamos adopted the doctrine of Balaam.

Revelation 2:14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. 15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. 16 Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

- It is time to leave a congregation when wicked women begin to dominate, such as happened in the congregation in Thyatira. The people were being led by a wicked woman who refused to repent. The congregation was opened to exploring the depths of Satan by calling that which was wrong, right.

Revelation 2:20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. 21 And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. 22 Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. 23 And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

- It is time to leave a congregation that will not embrace normal gospel duties, as the church in Sardis had neglected their normal ministries.

Revelation 3:2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

- It is time to leave a congregation when the congregation turns from the historic faith, and does not live out an authentic faith. The Lord promised the church in Philadelphia that he would discipline those “which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie” (Rev. 3:9).

Special Note.

A true Jew is one who embraces the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *Galatians 3:7 Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.*

- It is time to leave a congregation when the church is indifferent, and has no passion for the things of the Lord.

Revelation 3:15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. 16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Other Reasons for Leaving a Ministry

5. In addition to the reasons given by the Lord for leaving a congregation, there may be other reasons as well.
 - There may be a desire to respond to a “Macedonian call” for help. *Acts 16:9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.*

- Age may be a reason to leave the ministry. Dr. Lee Roberson was born in 1909. In 1942 he became pastor of Highland Park Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. In 1982, after forty years as pastor, he resigned believing he was getting too old for the demands of the ministry.
- Sometimes the Lord brings physical afflictions to a pastor, and health declines to the point it is necessary to leave a congregation into the hands of someone else.
- There was a time when divorce, or some form of immorality would cause a man to leave the ministry.
- Many men find the stress of ministry too overwhelming, and become emotionally unstable. It is time to leave a congregation when that happens.
- If a pastor changes his doctrinal position to something different than what the congregation has embraced, he has a responsibility to honestly tell the church, and let the church decide to embrace what the Lord is showing the pastor, or he should leave the congregation rather than create division.

How to Exit a Ministry

6. If a pastor feels the Lord is moving him from a congregation, there should be some personal preparation.
 - A man should ask himself, “Is this a realistic movement of the Lord, or, is the grass just looking greener on the other side?”
 - A man should ask himself, “Am I reasonably prepared to meet the new challenges I will be facing, or, shall I just rise to the level of my incompetence, according to the “Peter Principle”?”
 - A man should seek the counsel of godly men. What is their advice?
 - But, most important of all, what is the leading of the Holy Spirit?
 - Once a decision is reached to leave, prepare an honest resume. Then, contact proper people in authority (Church leaders, Denominational leaders, Placement helps). Begin to prepare for examination by those who hope to work with next.

Congregational Preparations

7. Because pastoral transitions involve others, let there be no surprises. Be the first to tell the congregation what is on your heart. Watch out for little slips that alert people to the fact that you are leaving (job performance drops, more conferences attended, physical withdrawing from people). Make sure all your commitments have been honored.

Thoughts about Entering a New Ministry

8. Some practical observations should be remembered in any pastoral transition.
 - It is far easier to exit a ministry, than to enter, and adjust to a new one. There are reasons.
 - ❖ Traditions are established.
 - ❖ The new comer is distrusted. Every relationship is a risk.
 - ❖ There can be a conspiracy of silence as to underlining issues in the congregation.
 - In many local churches, the leadership is out of control to a far greater degree than may be suspected. Sometimes the problem is the pastor, sometimes the problem is the Board leader, and sometimes the problem is in an unofficial member of the congregation. The name of the game is control. Christians love power. Therefore, visit a church, believe what you hear. People will speak what is on their heart.

Final Suggestions

9. When going into a new ministry, do the following.
 - Build relationships, not programs.
 - Do not try to impress, but be impressed.
 - Leave the existing structures alone, initially.
 - Give people room to grow and work, their way.
 - Be open, be humble, and be teachable.
 - Whatever the last pastor did that pleased the people, do it if at all possible.
 - Do not be too confident about solving problems. People do not change easily.
 - Wait on the Lord. He will protect you.