

Jason Helopoulos on Good Reasons for Moving On

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GUEST POST from Jason Helopoulos

“What right do you ever have to leave a church?” I can remember that question being asked by my ecclesiology professor in seminary. It is a good question and one that would benefit us all to wrestle with. As Kevin has recently pointed out on this blog, there is biblical warrant and there are practical reasons for entering into covenant through local church membership. Having entered into that covenant our breaking of it should never be done lightly. Clearly, there are reasons to leave a local church. But what are they? I have been thinking about this for the past ten years and this is my attempt at answering the question:

Good Reasons for Moving On—The Four P’s

1. Providential moving—If my job, family, or life has moved me from Dallas to Austin then I should probably find a local church in Austin, let alone if I moved from Michigan to North Carolina. It is right and good to belong to a local church and covenant with brothers and sisters in my own “backyard.”
2. Planting another church—It may be that I haven’t left my home town, but the church I belong to has decided to send me out with others to plant another church in the area. Notice though, that I am being sent out by my church, not leaving with a group of people because I am disgruntled or think it is a good idea.
3. Purity has been lost— It may take different forms, but primarily this occurs when the Word is no longer proclaimed. It could be that heresy is being taught, the Bible is never read or preached, or a much more prominent manifestation these days is that the Word is no longer seen as sufficient; it is used as a seasoning for the message of the week rather than the diet by which the congregation is fed and nourished upon. However, we must be careful here; patience should always be exercised and I must always test my own heart to see if I am “making a mountain out of a molehill.”
4. Peace of the church is in jeopardy due to my presence— This “reason” is hard to suggest for fear of it being abused, as it is by far the most subjective “reason.” However, there are cases where an individual/family can personally become a hindrance to the ministry of the local church and it is best for that person/family to move-on. If this is the reason I am contemplating leaving the church, then I must first test myself and discern whether it is because of sin on my own part. If that is the case then I must be quick to repent rather than move-on. This “reason” should always be approached with trepidation,

Possible Reasons for Moving On – The Three S’s

1. Spouse—An unbelieving or non-church attending spouse is not willing to attend this church, but will attend another with you.

2. Special Needs—Every family has special needs, so this one needs to be handled with care. A possible example may be that my family has a disabled child and another faithful church in the area has a wonderful ministry to disabled people which can help us.
3. Special Gifts—Another faithful church in the area may have asked for you to use your special gifts in their midst for the building up of the body (i.e. organist). Never decide this one on your own. If it is a possible reason, then it is too easy to think too highly of oneself and go running to the greener pastures. This is always something that should be taken to the leadership of your current church and wrestled through.

Reasons Often Used Which are Insufficient

1. Children's Ministry—The Children's ministry at another church is better. This cannot be a reason for changing churches. It is rather an opportunity for you to get involved in the children's ministry of your church.
2. Buzz—Many people will flow to whatever church in town has the current "buzz." The argument will be that the Spirit is at work there and we want to be part of it. But buzzes come and go. And so do the people that follow them.
3. Youth Group—The unhappiness of our teenage children in the current Youth Group, because of activities, other youth, etc. is not a reason for leaving the church we have covenanted with. I know this one will be controversial. Believe me, I have empathy as a parent and a former Youth Pastor. But our children are not the spiritual directors of our home. They should not be choosing the church we attend based upon their social status and network.
4. Church has changed—Churches always change. Unless the changes are unbiblical than we don't have a reason to move on. We don't move on when our wife or husband changes! We are we so quick to do so with the church we have covenanted with.
5. New Pastor—A new pastor is not a sufficient reason to change churches. It doesn't matter how stiff, impersonal, unfunny, etc. he is. The list is endless. It doesn't even matter if he is not the most interesting preacher. He is the man God called to this church for this time. And this is your church. Again, unless he is unbiblical why move on? You haven't covenanted with a man, but with this body.
6. I'm Not Being Ministered to—I tell every one of our new member classes, "If we all walked into church each week and had a list of people we were going to try and 'touch,' encourage, or minister to, do you know how dynamic this church would be? Just on Sunday mornings, let alone if we did it during the week. If we each were concerned about the other person and walked in each Sunday with that in the forefront of our mind instead of, "Why didn't he talk to me?," "Why doesn't anyone care about me?," "Why isn't anyone ministering to me?" Start ministering to others and you will find that you are being ministered to.
7. Music—Not a reason—whether it is slow, fast, traditional, contemporary, Psalms, hymns, or gospel choruses. Stop using it as an excuse!
8. There are others...we haven't even mentioned the service is too early, the coffee is terrible, the pastor doesn't know how to shuck corn (Yep...those are all true ones I have heard).