

## How To Leave a Church

or  
Living with a High View of  
Church Membership



### A High View of Membership

Both philosophically and constitutionally, Zion guards a high view of church membership that may seem strange to those who come from other church traditions.

There are five primary ways your membership status can change [Book of Church Order sections]:

- *Transfer to another evangelical church [46-1]*
- *Death*
- *Excommunication – discipline with process [chapters 30 to 36]*
- *Erasure from the Membership Roll – discipline without process [chapter 38-4]*
- *Removal from the Membership Roll (absent and residence unknown) [chapter 46-2]*

**If you are considering changing churches and have any questions about your situation, one of the Zion pastors or elders would be happy to help you think through the issues.**

### Zion Church

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Sunday Morning Worship: 8:30, 11:00  
Christian Education for all ages: 9:45  
Infant and toddler nursery provided.

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

*Hebrews 13:17*

# How to Leave a Church

... or ...

## Living with a High View of Church Membership

If you are thinking about leaving Zion, let's be clear: we don't want you to leave.

If you are thinking about leaving some other church in order to come to Zion, let's be just as clear: we're not sure we want you to do that, either.

Nevertheless, it is a fact of American church life that people do change churches from time to time. And there is a right way and a wrong way to go about it.

It all has to do with what the Bible teaches about the health and importance of the church. Every Christian has a responsibility to submit to the church's leadership and strive for the peace and purity of the church.

### Why Leave?

There are good reasons and bad reasons to consider a change.

**Change of Address** Naturally, if you change your residence, you should look for a church that is close enough to your new location so you can participate regularly. Be sure to notify the church you are leaving and ask about the procedure for having your name removed from the roll and having your membership transferred.

**An Apostate Church** At the time of the reformation, many had questions about whether or not to stay in a

corrupt church. The reformers had a high view of the church: they believed that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside the church. They flatly re-

jected the idea that unhappy churchmen could just leave one church and start another whenever they wanted. The reformers determined that no Christian should leave a church that had the three essential

marks of a true church: word, sacrament, and discipline. As long as the Bible was faithfully preached, as long as the sacraments were duly practiced, and as long as discipline was administered, a Christian was not free to leave without permission.

So you should consider whether or not you are in a true church. If you have been in a non-Christian cult, or in a compromised church that does not preach the gospel, then leave and don't look back.

Or if you are in a church that does not practice baptism and communion, you should leave. Or if you are in a church that lets open sin and scandalous behavior pass without rebuke and discipline, you should leave.

But honestly, most people consider changing churches without facing problems of Word, Sacrament or Discipline in their church

**Matters of Doctrine.** Sometimes people want to change churches because of a change in their understanding of doctrine. Maybe a Baptist becomes convinced of household/covenant baptism. Or a Methodist becomes a Calvinist. In such cases, you should describe the change in your thinking to your church leaders, and ask them if they see any problems with you seeking a change.

**Matters of Practice** It may be the case that your church has gone through changes of practice or program that make it hard to stay. Maybe the worship music has completely changed, or the church no longer has a catechism class for children.

We must acknowledge that such matters of practice are not essentials, but are matters of preference and emphasis. DO NOT LEAVE in these circumstances unless

you have discussed the matter with your church leaders and they have no objections if you make a change.

**Matters of Conflict** Many people seek to leave a church during times of church conflict. Perhaps the leadership is in conflict, or there have been unresolved personal

offenses. Sometimes people leave because their own sin has become known. Sadly, in too many cases the church's leadership may be trying to address scandalous behavior and

the person involved just runs away.

DO NOT LEAVE in these circumstances while there are matters of unresolved offense. Romans 12:18 tells us "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." It is your responsibility to seek reconciliation in every relationship where there has been an offense. Your church leaders should be able to help you identify relationships that need healing before you leave.

### How to Leave

There are good ways and bad ways to leave.

**Good** Make sure your leaders know why you want to make a change. Give them a chance to speak to your concerns. Ask them if they are aware of any unreconciled offenses that you should attend to before leaving. If you are on the church roll, have your membership transferred or removed. At your next church you never spread a bad report about your previous church.

If Zion's leaders were to contact the leaders of your previous church, what would they hear?

**Bad** You just stop coming and never talk to anyone about your decision to make a change. There are unresolved offenses with others at the church and you have not taken steps to make peace. You have a critical attitude towards the church leaders and you make negative comments about them to others.

Remember: In many places in the world and through history, Christians have had one choice: either be faithful in the village's one church, or be in no church at all. The variety of church options we have in our American society is an odd and unusual circumstance.

The Bible tells us to obey our church leaders. You can change churches and still be in obedience to your church leaders if you tell them of your plans and reasons for making a change, and they grant you leave.

Can you pass the "supermarket test": if you see someone from the old church at the other end of the aisle in the grocery store, are you happy to meet them or do you quickly slip into the next aisle to avoid them?