

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

Three Questions Before Quitting Your Church

by Tim Challies

We all know there are times and circumstances in which the only right course of action is to leave a church. If the church leadership has apostatized or proven themselves unqualified for ministry, if they are preaching a false gospel, if they have surrendered to the culture, we need to get out. We can leave these churches boldly and without looking back, shaking the dust from our feet.

But more often than not, we leave churches for what we might consider discretionary reasons. We don't *need* to leave, but *choose* to leave. And we typically do this when we feel weary of the people, when we feel like they aren't interested in us anymore, when relationships feel cool rather than warm, when we feel like we need a fresh start.

I wonder if you are in such a place right now—you are part of a church but feeling restless, ready to move on. Maybe you've attended another church a time or two and are finding yourself drawn to that congregation, to those people. It's not always wrong to leave a church under such circumstances, but before you do, I would want to ask three important questions, all of which I've asked many times as an elder and pastor of Grace Fellowship Church: *Your love for others grows in direction proportion to your prayer for them.*

Here's the first question: *Have you been praying for the people of this church?* Your love for others grows in direction proportion to your prayer for them. As you pray for people, you find that you love them. You are called to pray for your enemies in the hope that they will become your brothers and sisters and for strangers in the hope that they will become your friends. How much more, then, are you to pray for your fellow church members? When you don't pray for the people in your church you may soon find your heart cooling toward them. Once your love cools you may find yourself blaming them for your discontentment when really it began within you. Before you leave a church, first determine that you will take a period of time to pray—to pray for the people specifically and by name. Then see if your heart remains cool and distant.

Here's the second question: *Have you been serving the people of this church?* Your love for others grows hand-in-hand with your service to them. As you *do* love toward others you naturally *feel* love toward others. Too many Christians prefer to be served rather than looking for every opportunity to serve. They gauge their emotional response to the church by the actions others have taken or not taken toward them. Yet God's first call to us is not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45, Philippians 2:5-11). The more we imitate Christ in his selfless service, the more our love grows warm. Before you leave a church, first determine that you will take a period of time to serve that church—to creatively seek out opportunities to serve and surprise. Then see if your heart remains cool and distant. You need to embrace the whole life of a church, not just the one main gathering.

And one last question: *Have you been with the people of this church?* Have you been there on Sunday morning, and if you have, have you been all-in, looking for people to speak to, new people to meet, coffee to brew, chairs to stack? Have you been at the Sunday evening or mid-week services, or the prayer meetings, or the small groups? If everyone else in the church is getting together three times a week while you parachute for a quick Sunday morning fix, you will necessarily feel like an outsider looking in. You need to embrace the whole life of a church, not just the one main gathering. Before you leave a church, first determine that for a time you will commit to it all the way. Then see if your heart remains cool and distant.

Under many circumstances we have freedom before God to move from one church to another. In some cases this is a necessary course of action while in others it is a sinful course of action. Most of the time, though it is discretionary, depending on the particulars, the circumstances, the heart. Before you make such a move, do consider the questions: Have you been praying for the people of the church? Have you been serving the people of the church? Have you been with the people of the church? Love grows cold where there is no prayer. Love grows cold where there is no service and no togetherness. In other words, love grows cold where there is no love—no expression of love through prayer, through deeds, through fellowship.

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Instructive Worship

by Andrew Roy Croft

*"It was the voices of the brothers at my side. They were singing out my song. When the song in me had died."
Andrew Peterson*

Congregational singing is a major means of grace and growth for the soul of the Christian, it is a distinctive discipline of God's people to pour out their hearts and lift their voices together in common worship of the One who has loved and redeemed them. Singing together is the activity of Christians who wish to serve one another, who are willing to struggle together all the way to glory, who intuitively understand the power of song to lift our souls, strengthen our hands, and enlarge our hearts. There is little risk for the modern church to undervalue sung worship in terms of quantity, but there is a real danger that we might devalue its quality and function, that we might give it a place in the set but not a part in the drama of our pilgrimage home.

True congregational singing will always have a subjective effect on the believer, but only via objective truth; it will move the heart, it will raise emotion, but not as an end in itself. Eighteen years ago I had my first and only experience of seeing a Premiership football team play at their home ground. Tottenham Hotspur were playing host to Fiorentina at White Hart Lane, and it was an amazing experience as one of football's non-followers to be among thousands of people united in how they dressed, who they were rooting for, and how they sang. I didn't know the words of their anthems, but I could feel the affective weight of them: hard-boiled football fans wept hot tears, they lifted their hands, they swayed in unison, they closed their eyes in a form of sporting ecstasy. It would have been easy in that charged environment to forget that their gathering and their songs were centered around a group of men kicking a ball around for 90 minutes.

So much that passes for sung worship has a little bit of White Hart Lane about it - a hypnotic sensory experience which lifts us and lulls us on the lilt of a song, on a group identity, on the sweeping torrent of melody and musical proficiency which we have amassed as Christians. If that is all we have we are short changing ourselves, and short circuiting what real worship is meant to be. Emotionally evacuated worship is not virtuous, but nor is intellectually vacuous praise. The beauty of true worship is that we address ourselves to God, but we also address one another with who God is and what he has said. We worship in our spirits, by the power of the Holy Spirit, but also with deep intellectual investment, with an eye fixed on the glory of the gospel as well as a heart tuned to its sentiments. Such worship is deeply didactic, it retrains the flagging disciple, it prohibits empty sentiment, it draws our attention and our affection towards the God in whose presence and power we are meeting.

I very recently experienced this in a personal way. Out of the briars and thorns of daily discipleship, from the tough terrain of holding on to hope in Christ in the wasteland, I gathered with brothers and sisters who sang Psalm 111 together. The melody was simple, the words plain and bound to tight metre, but the experience was a beautiful balance of heart and head. The song in my soul was faint on entering our church building, but my spirit was strengthened by singing God's word with God's people, and listening to their voices as they lifted him high. The experience was not airily ecstatic but deeply moving, an antidote to the superficiality of much of modern life, and a humbling exercise in putting God in his true place. My brothers and sisters taught me and trained me in those moments to see the glory of God amid the heavy mists of Christian discipleship, and I am deeply grateful for it. We did not aim for mere experience, but for truth lifted on the strain of human song, and our souls soared in the process.

This is the experience of worship which I always want to encounter, and which I would wish to foster. This lifting of song and soul together is not predicated on the composition date of a hymn, nor on the cultural/aesthetic preferences of the worshipping community, but on the more foundational issue of how we worship in song, the spiritual mechanics and aspirations which should underlie singing together.