



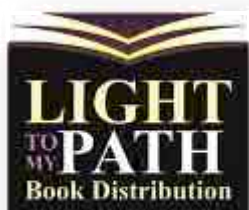
WOUNDED HEARTS AND EMPTY PEWS

Biblical Guidelines
to Deal with a
Church Split

F. Wayne Mac Leod

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

*Biblical Guidelines to
Deal with a Church Split*



F. Wayne Mac Leod

Light To My Path Book Distribution
Sydney Mines, NS CANADA B1V 1Y5

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

Copyright © 2017 by F. Wayne Mac Leod

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

“Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.”

Scripture quotations from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown’s patentee, Cambridge University Press

Special thanks to Diane Mac Leod for proof reading.

Table of Contents

Preface	1
The Reality of Divisions and Splits	3
Why People Leave Their Church	7
Is it Ever Right to Leave Your Church?	17
Is There a Positive Side to Church Splits?	27
When Division is Inevitable	35
Healing from a Church Split	43

Preface

My missionary career began in an overseas church that was going through some significant problems with division among its members. That would not be the only such experience I would have in my ministry. I have often been called to work with churches that have gone through difficult times. The inspiration for this study, in fact, comes from one of those times and was my way of sorting through the various issues I was experiencing in those days. I suspect that I am not alone in this.

This book has sat on my computer for over ten years. I suppose I needed time to continue sorting out my own feelings and hurts. For some reason, I am now ready to share it with others. I trust that the insights the Lord has given will be a blessing to those who read.

What causes people to leave their church? Is there ever a right reason to leave a church? Are all church splits bad? How do you leave a church when leaving seems inevitable? How do you heal from the emotional and spiritual pain that comes from a harsh division of believers? These are some of the questions I would like to address in this book.

I cannot hope to cover all the questions the reader might have. This is not the purpose of this study. I do, however, want to direct the reader to some basic principles that could be of help as they seek the direction of the Lord for their circumstance.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

I can only hope that the reflections of this book will be a comfort to those who have suffered through having to leave their church or who have experienced people leaving their church for various reasons. May the Lord be pleased to use it to direct and comfort His people in this regard.

F. Wayne MacLeod

Chapter 1 - The Reality of Divisions and Splits

This age in which we live could very well go down in history as the age of church splits and divisions. While the message of the gospel is crossing cultural and political frontiers in a way that is unparalleled by any generation before us, there has never been so many denominations and splinter groups. In an article in the June 14th 1996 issue of the Wall Street Journal, Calmetta Y. Coleman states that one denomination reported an average loss of 29 churches a year to other groups. She went on to say:

Even among the centralized denominations, the switch is occurring. There are Baptist churches becoming Presbyterian, Lutheran churches going charismatic, Pentecostal churches turning Episcopalian and so on. The number of denominational switches reaches well into the hundreds, and religious experts say the pace is accelerating. (*Coleman, Calmetta Y., "A Charismatic Church Deals With a Preacher Who Finds New Faith" The Wall Street Journal, June 14, 1996: A7.*)

In my years of ministry, I have seen many such divisions. My initiation into the work of overseas missions was one

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

of trying to bring reconciliation to a church stifled by division. This problem is evident no matter where you go in the world. Much of church growth as we know it today could be characterised by the phrase “multiplication by division.” Take the time to look at the history of your church. What evidence is there of splits in its history? What evidence is there of this in the history of your denomination?

In one of the towns where we worked, a church split into three groups and moved to separate towns. Very shortly after this one of these groups underwent a second split, forming yet a fourth church (this time of a different denomination). The total membership of all four churches was less than one hundred. When we arrived several years later, the believers were still struggling with a sense of confusion and abandonment resulting from this split. Two of these churches were struggling simply to survive.

I know of two towns where two or three churches of the same denomination are within eyesight of each other, each with a building large enough to hold them all, but members would never think of joining forces. One does not have to go far to see evidence such divisions.

Division is not always wrong. Many times, it is God's way of purifying His church. Church splits, however, often leave scars. Sometimes believer is turned against believer causing years of bitterness and hostility. These divisions can also greatly hinder our Christian witness in the community.

What causes divisions? Is there ever a good reason to leave a church? If a split is inevitable, what can we do to minimise the damage it will cause? In this study, we will look at these important questions. It is my desire that this study be a comfort and guide to many who have experienced or are experiencing such a struggle.

The Reality of Divisions and Splits

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there of divisions and splits in the community where you live? What were the reasons for these divisions?
- Is there ever a good reason for church members to go their separate ways? What are they?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for your church fellowship. Thank Him for some very specific blessings He has given you in that fellowship.
- Ask the Lord to reveal any dissension in your church that needs to be addressed in a godly way?
- Ask God to help the members of your church to walk together in greater unity.

Chapter 2 - Why People Leave Their Church

What causes churches to split? Why might people feel compelled to leave their church? There are many reasons for this. Let's take a moment to examine some of those reasons.

Doctrine

There are certain basic doctrines on which we must take a firm stand. Personally, I hold three doctrines close to my heart. I believe that if we are to have true fellowship with others we must be agreed on the authority of the Word of God. If we do not see God's Word as our authority, we have no basis for determining what God expects of us and have no common ground on which to determine our beliefs and practices. Second, we need to take a firm stand on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. To reject this doctrine is to cast aside the work of our Lord Jesus. Those who preach a salvation apart from Christ, preach another gospel. Third, we must also have a solid belief in the deity of Christ. We must believe that Jesus is who He said He was.

There are other issues, on which I also have a firm stand. I believe these doctrines to be based solidly on the Word of God and hold them also very dear to my heart. These

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

issues, however, should not be the standard by which we measure true fellowship. While I have my view of what the Bible teaches about the end times, I am quite free to fellowship with others who do not hold my position. Some people see this as a compromise. I have never felt that I have compromised my belief nor do I feel that those with whom I worship are inferior because they do not see Scripture the way I see it. I have had tremendous Christian fellowship with those who do not believe as I do on secondary doctrinal issues.

There are people who will not associate with others who do not believe exactly as they do. They seem to believe that unity comes from a common doctrinal statement. There could be nothing farther from the truth. Our unity comes from the fact that we are saved by grace and adopted into the family of God. We don't have to agree on everything to be children of God or worship together. Some years ago, I was part of an evangelical, interdenominational prayer and fellowship group. As a group, we experienced tremendous unity and fellowship in Christ. The Lord used this group in many lives. Individuals from various doctrinal persuasions came together on the basis that they had a common Saviour. We grew in love and understanding of what true fellowship is about. On the other hand, I have seen churches filled with people all adhering to a common doctrinal statement, who could not get along.

What I am saying is this: There are people who leave a church because they do not like the church's position on a secondary doctrine. We should study these doctrines and have our opinions. Leaving a church because we don't agree on a secondary doctrine, however, may be a pretence for something deeper. The person who leaves a church because of a minor doctrinal difference may think he or she is doing so to maintain the purity of doctrine, but

Why People Leave Their Church

in reality, the reason may be quite different. Maybe they are leaving because they are too proud to associate with anyone who doesn't believe exactly as they do. To split a church over minor doctrinal differences only proves that we have never learned to accept and love each other with our differences.

Worship style

The question of worship is a big one. In recent years, we have seen much division in churches over this issue. The younger generation wants to sing more contemporary music. The older generation enjoys the traditional hymns. Some prefer a formal, structured church service while others would rather a spontaneous worship format. What church has not had to face these issues in our day?

Many worshippers are not comfortable with a certain type of worship. We should by all means find a church where we can worship in the way we feel most comfortable. On the other hand, we have also seen bitterness and hostility develop between believers over this issue. Splits over the form of worship need to be examined very carefully. Very often the issue is not so much the worship style as it is a glorification of tradition or a spirit of rebellion and pride.

People who leave a church because of its worship style need to ask themselves whether they are leaving for God or for themselves. Are they leaving because God is not being honoured, or because their personal comfort zones have been trampled on? It is one thing to quietly leave a church to find another where you are more comfortable. It is another to cause division and bitterness over how sincere believers prefer to worship God.

Practices

How about the church that split because the pastor was not comfortable with giving an altar call? While the pastor was preaching faithfully the Word of God, many interpreted his refusal to give an altar call as being a lack of concern for lost souls. I have seen another church split over the issue of whether a sincere Christian should participate in a certain community group. Each of these issues needs to be examined carefully. It is clear from the Word of God that Christians will not always agree. Paul and Barnabas had to part company over a dispute they had about John Mark (see Acts 15:36-41). While partings may be necessary in certain situations, we need to be sure that it is not because of a spirit of intolerance and spiritual pride. Remember that of all the people of the New Testament, Jesus spoke most powerfully against the Pharisees ("the separated ones"). This group saw themselves as being more spiritual than anyone else because of their strict religious lifestyle and practices. In God's eyes, however, they were no better than the common sinner.

Disagreement over decisions

We have all heard people threaten to leave the church over an unpopular decision made by the leadership. Let's be honest with ourselves. You are in the minority if you agree with every decision that was ever made in your church. We have all heard the story of the church that split over the colour of the carpet in the sanctuary. I have worshipped in a church building with a leaky tin roof and open holes in the wall for windows. I have also preached and worshipped in a car garage with bare concrete floors and walls. These times of worship can be just as alive as worship in a luxurious church building.

Why People Leave Their Church

Behind this type of split very often is a spirit of wounded pride. We didn't get our own way so we decide to leave. Sometimes we even threaten to leave to get our way. This is obviously not an acceptable reason for leaving a church.

Dominant Personalities

Another reason for church splits has to do with the issue of dominant personalities in the church. People have a natural tendency to follow. They will flock like sheep to an individual they respect as a leader. At times that leader may come into conflict with the rest of the church. When he leaves, his followers may leave with him. Other times these leaders catch a different vision for the work. Soon they have influenced others to follow them. While a new vision or direction may be good, we need to ask ourselves who we are following. Are we following our respected leaders or are we truly being led of God?

Changing membership

As a missionary family working overseas, we had the opportunity of visiting many different churches. Over the years, we have seen the personalities of churches radically change. People grow old and die. Others move away from the community. Still others move into the community. When we returned to some churches for furlough, we found that we did not know many of the people. Old friends had moved away. Other churches, due to lack of youth have chosen to cater to the older folks. Still others tend to draw a younger crowd. We can begin to feel out of place in our own church. These changes may be too much to handle and may cause people to move on to another church.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

It is important for us to realise, however, that a changing membership is not necessarily a reason to leave. While old friends may no longer be near, there is nothing stopping us from developing new friendships. These new relationships can be equally as valuable as the old. Some time ago I was doing a Bible study in a church. A young man from another province, passing through on business came to the meeting. Some of the members went over to him after the meeting and apologised for not having anyone his age at the meeting (most of the people present were retired). The man responded by telling them that seeing so many older believers in that meeting was a real source of encouragement to him. The church he attended was composed entirely of young people. They longed to see older people come to Christ but were not making a breakthrough. Before you leave a church because of changing membership, ask yourself whether this is really the will of God. Maybe God has a specific role for you to play in this changing church.

Boredom

Others leave a church because of boredom. They see the same people week in and week out. Nothing seems to change in their church. They know the church service inside out. They have become tired of singing the same hymns. The messages don't seem to have any impact. They feel the need of a change. We all know of many churches like this. The problem, however, is that these churches need life too. If all the dynamic people leave for more exciting pastures, where does this leave the church? Could it be that the Lord would have you to make a change within the church?

Why People Leave Their Church

Discipline

One of the problems we had to deal with on the mission field when exercising church discipline was the tendency of people to simply leave the church and join another without ever dealing with the issue at hand. This is very much like the person who says to his boss: "You can't fire me, I quit." In many cases, this is simply a refusal on the part of those under discipline to submit to the authority of the church. To leave a church because you are being disciplined would be wrong. If the discipline of the church is being properly administered, it is for the good of the person concerned. It is far better to submit and be reconciled than to take your problem with you to another church.

Disillusionment

Sometimes people come to a church with big expectations. They have exaggerated ideas about a given fellowship. When they discover that people in this church have the same problems as the church they left, they become disillusioned. We have all met people who move from one church to another in search of the perfect church. When they find some fault with the church they leave and move to another. As someone once said: "If you find a perfect church, don't join it, you're sure to ruin it."

None of us is perfect. Human nature is such that problems and conflict are inevitable in any church. I used to feel that I had to defend my church. When people would point out its imperfections I would take it personally. The Lord is teaching me, however, that the reason He places us in churches is to help deal with these conflicts. To leave a church because you are disillusioned is to fail to recognise human nature. You ought to expect difficulties and conflicts. I was once speaking with a man who told me that the

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

thing he liked about his marriage was that it was perfect. My immediate thought was: "Where has this man been for the last ten years?" Anyone who is married understands that conflict and disagreements are inevitable. These conflicts, however, do not need to cause a separation in the relationship between the couple. Sometimes it takes hard work and a great deal of pride swallowing to deal with conflict. Married couples know, however, that you come out stronger for it in the end. This can be the same in a church. Before running away, try to deal with the conflict. You will be surprised at what may happen.

Band wagon

There is one more reason I would like to examine for church splits and divisions. I have met individuals who left their former church because they saw everyone else leaving and so they did the same. The reality of the matter is this. Many people leave a church because that is what their friends are doing. They will jump on the wagon and go with the flow even though they may not have a clear sense of why they are doing so.

Before making a radical decision to leave your church, examine your motives. Are your motives pure? Are you leaving for the glory of God or are you leaving for yourself? Carefully seek God in this. Ask Him to reveal your true motives and seek His leading in what you are doing.

For Consideration:

- Do we need to share the same beliefs to have fellowship and worship together? Have you ever had good fellowship with a believer who differs from

Why People Leave Their Church

you in the interpretation of Scripture on some minor point?

- Can believers differ in how they worship or in what they believe is acceptable practice? How accepting are you of these differences? Where do you draw the line and say you can no longer fellowship with believers who differ?
- How has your church changed over the years? Have these changes been good or bad?
- When is it best to submit to the discipline of a local church? Is there ever a time when it is better to leave?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to be more tolerant of the differences between believers in the interpretation of Scripture and in practice.
- Ask the Lord to show you when you need to work with those who differ from you and when you need to move in a different direction and find another church so as not to hinder what they feel God has called them to do.

Chapter 3 -

Is it Ever Right to Leave Your Church?

There are people who believe that when you become a member of a church you can never leave. For these individuals, their commitment to the local church is a life time covenant which can never be broken. To leave the church would be equivalent to leaving one's marriage partner. Is this a fair comparison?

It is true that Scripture uses the symbolism of marriage to illustrate the relationship between God and His church. There is no doubt that my relationship with God can be compared to a marriage. The relationship between God and His people is a lifetime covenantal relationship. As a loving husband, God will always care for and love His wife the church. He will never leave her or forsake her (see Joshua 1:5). The church, as a loving wife, is bound to God by a covenant of faithfulness. Marriage is a wonderful example of the relationship between God and His people.

The illustration of marriage, however, is not necessarily a good illustration when it comes to the believer and the local church. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, it can shift attention from God to church. Admittedly, my relationship to God does include the local church but it goes much

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

deeper than this. The local church is only part of my relationship with God. I would venture to say that there have been times when the local church can even stand between a believer and his or her relationship with God. I have been in ministry now for long enough to have seen individuals who have placed their church before God. I have met pastors who have spent so much time working at their church that their families have suffered. I have myself have at times neglected my relationship with God because I was too involved with church activities.

There may be times in the life of the believer where he or she must choose between obedience to God and the local church. Paul told Timothy that an elder must first “manage his own family well” (1 Timothy 3:4, NIV). This implies that he will not be able to devote as much time to the work of the church because of his family obligations.

In my lifetime, I have been a member of many different local churches and denominations. My commitment has changed over the years. God’s leading has taken me to many local churches and denominations in Canada and overseas. Where does the illustration of marriage to a local church fit into this picture? If I had seen my relationship to the local church to be for life I would never have left Canada to work overseas. My commitment is to God. When God leads me to a certain location, I seek out a local church and contribute what I can to the work of that church. When God moves me elsewhere, my commitment to that body ceases. I am not married to my local church; my covenant is with God.

While God expects us to be faithful to a local body, He may lead us to another church or to another ministry. There are those who place their church or their denomination on a

Is it Ever Right to Leave Your Church?

par with God. Those who do so make an idol of their local church.

While I don't believe that we should make an idol of our local church, it very important for us as believers to find a local body of believers where we can fellowship. Having said this, there are circumstances where the local church ceases to be a blessing in our walk with God. In fact, I would venture to say that the local church can even become a hindrance in our spiritual growth. When this happens, we need to examine whether it is God's purpose for us to remain or to seek another fellowship. There may be many reasons for us to consider leaving our local church. I use the word "consider" here because we need to be sensitive to the leading of the Lord in this matter. What may apply to one person may not apply to another. Let's take a moment, however, to some of the reasons why a person might consider leaving their church.

BIBLICAL / THEOLOGICAL REASONS

Rejection of the Authority of God's Word

I would personally have great difficulty remaining in a church that denied the authority of the Word of God. The Bible is the standard upon which I build my faith. I can always remember attending a Religious Studies class in University where the professor lectured on "the danger of believing in the authority of the Bible." I am glad I did not attend his church. If you take away the Bible, what do you have left? You have nothing more than human philosophy and reasoning. Anything is possible and admissible. The church becomes nothing more than a social club whose purpose is to share religious ideas without any authority base to validate their thinking. How do we know who God is if we do not have His Word? How do we know what He

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

expects of us if we do not study and apply His Word? Seminaries and Universities throughout our countries are producing pastors who have serious doubts about the authority of the Word of God.

When a church has turned its back on the Word of God they are doomed to fight the spiritual battle that rages on in our society without a weapon. They are defenceless against the onslaught of the philosophies of this world. Its members fall prey to the influences of the world. The prophet Hosea put it this way: "my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge (NIV, Hosea 4:6a). Without God's intervention, there is no hope for spiritual growth and renewal in the church that has rejected the authority of the Word of God. If you belong to such a church, I would suggest you find another church where you can be fed upon the Word of God. There can be no growth apart from His Word.

Denial of Christ

John writes in 1 John 2:22,23:

Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies the Father and the Son. No man who denies the Son has the Father ... (NIV 1John 2.22,23).

I seriously wonder how anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God can call themselves Christian. This may be a strong statement, but it is fundamental to all I believe. John calls such a person an antichrist. What hope do we have of eternity if Jesus is not God? If Jesus is not God, He is a liar and deceiver for He certainly claimed to be God in the Scriptures. If He is a liar and de-

Is it Ever Right to Leave Your Church?

ceiver, He is unworthy of our worship. To worship Him under these conditions would be blasphemous. Once again, if you belong to such a church, I would suggest that you find a church that gives Christ the honour due His name. Listen to what Paul says:

(Romans 16:17 NIV) I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

If you see brothers who are causing division by teaching things contrary to the teaching of the apostles – “keep away from them.” This certainly gives us cause to leave the fellowship of those whose teaching is contrary to the teaching of Scripture about Christ.

Persistence in Sin

The third Biblical reason for leaving a church has to do with lifestyle. Once again Paul has some clear teaching on this issue:

(1 Corinthians 5:11, NIV) But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

Matthew 18 tells us that when a brother sins we are to go to that brother and show him his fault. If he refuses to listen to us, we are to bring a witness on a second visit. If he refuses to listen to us in the presence of a witness, we are to bring this matter before the church. If he refuses to listen at this point we are to separate ourselves from him.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

In recent years, we have had to face several moral issues in the church. Dishonesty and corruption occurs even in the church of Christ. Paul tells us that we are not to associate with this type of people. I see this to mean that if we belong to a church which does stand firmly on the moral principles of Scripture, even after being approached and exhorted in this matter, then we have every obligation as true believers to separate ourselves from them and find a church that walks in integrity according to the principles of God's Word.

PERSONAL REASONS

Stagnation and Spiritual Decline

Maybe your church does not fall under any of the above categories yet you have been in this church for many years and have not seen any spiritual growth in your life. I have met many individuals like this. For years, they have sat under the preaching of their church but have never grown. Years pass and they are no closer to the Lord than when they first met Him. There can be any number of reasons for this. Sometimes the fault lies in the preaching. Sometimes the Word of God is not being preached from the pulpit. At other times, it is in the fact that there is no spiritual appetite in the congregation. People attend church but have no real desire to grow. This leaves the person who wants to grow with no fellowship or spiritual encouragement.

These things can cause stagnation in the life of a true believer. In these cases, I would suggest that believers seek out a group of sincere believers who can encourage them in their walk with the Lord. This does not necessarily require leaving their church. This fellowship group may be outside their church. In the end, however, spiritual growth

Is it Ever Right to Leave Your Church?

and maturity in Christ should be our great priority. If your church is hindering you from your growth in Christ, you have cause for concern and need to seek the Lord about this.

Irreconcilable Differences

Paul and Barnabas had an irreconcilable difference regarding the question of John Mark (Acts 15:36-41). The only solution to their problem was to go their separate ways. There are many similar cases in churches today. Sometimes these differences may be related to the way things are done in the church. Other times an individual has a change of theology which makes his participation in a particular denomination very delicate. While it would be nice to think that we could solve every difference in a congregation, this is really too idealistic. There is often more than one way of seeing things. Answers are not always black and white. Some people will simply never be able to resolve their differences in this life. If they were to continue to work together, they would only cause friction for the rest of the body. Like Paul and Barnabas, there are times when the best solution is simply to respectfully part company.

Leading of God

I would like to touch on one final reason for leaving a local assembly. There are times when the Lord will simply call us on to another location and work. Even as pastors sense the call of God to move on to another church, so we must allow God the right to redirect our gifted members to other local bodies. God still calls missionaries from local churches to go to foreign fields. He may very well call some of your gifted young people to full time service. He may call an average member to another work. I am sure that it was not easy for the church in Antioch to hear God tell them

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

that He was taking Paul and Barnabas from them for another work (see Acts 13:2-3). Our commitment is to the greater cause of Christ and not simply to the building up of our own local church. Let us count it a privilege to have one of our members reach out beyond our walls to serve in another part of the vineyard. To feel bitterness and animosity in such a case is to despise the call of God. Be open to what God may be calling you to do. To place one's local church ahead of the call of God would be to live in disobedience to the will of God.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between the relationship of a husband and wife and our relationship with our church? How do these relationships differ? Does God have the same expectation of both relationships?
- What are some Biblical and theological reasons for which you might want to consider leaving your church?
- Is it acceptable to leave a church where you are not growing spiritually?
- Are there times when God may call a church in a direction that not all members are comfortable with? What should those who are not comfortable with this direction do in this event?
- Have you ever had a time when you felt that the Lord was calling you to another church? Explain.

Is it Ever Right to Leave Your Church?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for times when the church took God's place in your life. Ask God to help you to always place Him alone first in your heart.
- Ask God to give you a clear understanding of what is important to Him. Ask Him to help you to stand firm on those truths and never give in.
- Ask God to show you if you are ever standing in the way of what He wants to do in your church. Ask for grace to either humble yourself or the wisdom to move out of the way lest you hinder His purpose for the church.
- Ask God to show you when you need to fight for what you believe and when you need to leave and let Him work in His own way.

Chapter 4 -

Is There a Positive Side to Church Splits?

If you have ever been part of a church split, you may very well have wondered what good could possibly come out of it. We all know the negative side of a church split with all the emotion and deep hurt. There are times, however, when going our separate ways can be beneficial. In saying this, please understand that I am not encouraging the reader to leave his or her local church. My goal, however, is to show that the Lord can use these circumstances for good.

Purifying of Church

Very often church splits have a purifying effect. During the time of the Reformation, the church had been wandering from the basic truths of the gospel. The doctrines of salvation by grace alone and the absolute authority of Scripture had been watered down. The church needed to be cleansed. Martin Luther was one of the men God would use to bring about this cleansing. While it was not his original intention to leave the church, his questioning of the established leadership led to a great renewal and ultimately to the formation of a new church. The reformation had a purifying effect on the church. The gospel once

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

again was being preached from the pulpits of Europe. Sin was dealt with and people were renewed in their faith.

The fact of the matter is this. Human beings left to themselves have a natural tendency to turn from God and the principles of His Word. It is much easier to let matters slide than to exercise church discipline. It is more pleasant to preach what people like to hear than to confront them with the sometimes-harsh truths of the Word of God. Very often we become comfortable with our traditions and our eyes are taken from Christ. The world and its influences are never far from us. If left alone churches will naturally drift away from the clear teaching of the Word of God. Like He did in the Old Testament, every so often God will send a prophet to shake the church and awaken her from her sleep.

In Exodus 32 we read how Moses had been on the mountain in the presence of God. God told him to return to his people because they had rebelled against Him. When Moses returned to the camp, he discovered that the people had made for themselves a golden calf. When he saw what was happening, Moses called all who were for the Lord to join him. Some rallied to his side while others refused. This was one of the first splits between God's people. God expected nothing less of Moses that day. Moses and his followers separated themselves from those who had turned from God. That day God sent a plague to wipe out those who had bowed down to another god. It was by this means that the people of Israel were purified and sin was removed.

When I worked on the island of Mauritius some years ago, I had the responsibility of serving in a church that had been experiencing much division. As we began to deal with one problem after another and seek the Lord and the direction

Is There a Positive Side to Church Splits?

He would have us go, the troublemakers began to leave. Many of these individuals were not comfortable with the way the church was headed and decided of their own free will to leave and go elsewhere. I have spoken with pastors who have recounted the same story. Very often God has His own way of purifying His church. He may purify His church either by removing trouble makers or by separating for Himself a people with whom He desires to do a greater work.

Growth and Renewal

I have met various individuals who have experienced tremendous renewal and growth after leaving their church of many years. In some cases, these individuals had been in churches where the truth of the Scriptures was not being taught. There was a hunger deep in their souls that was not being satisfied. I have seen what happens when these individuals are fed on the truth of the Word of God. For many, their lives were transformed. I have heard them say: "I attended church all my life and was never taught these truths." Like a root-bound plant that can no longer grow, when transplanted to a Bible teaching church, these individuals exploded in new growth. It is such a blessing to see this.

We also need to understand that not everybody is the same. Some people worship best in a traditional setting while others need more freedom and spontaneity. The combination of people, gifts and ministries is different in each church. Each congregation has its own unique flavour and emphasis. Like plants, people flourish in different soils. There are times when people, like plants, need to be transplanted to another church if they are going to reach their full potential. We should never be so focused on building up our own local church that we refuse to allow

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

our members the opportunity to go where they can experience greater growth and renewal. What is important here is not the number of members on our roll but the maturing of believers in Christ.

Multiplication of work force

When Paul and Barnabas parted company in Acts 15, what was the result? Barnabas took John Mark with him and set out in one direction. Paul took Silas and set out in another direction. The missionary force was doubled. Instead of one team of two people preaching the gospel we have two teams of two people. While we have no record of the ministry of Barnabas and John Mark at that time, we can assume that their ministry, too, was blessed by God. It is true that Paul and Barnabas did part company because of their different views. The fact of the matter, however, is that both were servants of God intent on doing His will. I am convinced that God blessed and used both missionary teams for His glory.

The church of our day has been riddled with splits and divisions. We do have to realise, however, that God has used many of these divisions for His glory. People are being drawn to the Lord and matured in the faith through a great number of these churches. God's true children can be found in many different denominations. While we may not always agree, we must admit that God is working in other churches besides our own. There is a sense in which God is using these divisions for His glory. The work force has expanded. Our efforts to reach the world have multiplied many times over. Each group has its own emphasis and reaches people others cannot reach. God has used splits through the years to multiply His missionary work force.

Is There a Positive Side to Church Splits?

Greater unity in division

There are times when the best way to get along with someone is to distance yourself slightly from them. Face it, there are some personalities that clash. When you put them together in the same church, they lock horns every time they see each other. I am not one who believes that denominations are of the devil. I believe that they are necessary because of human nature. Denominations tend to group people of like mind. In theory, at least, the possibility of conflict is reduced because we are associating with people who see things the way we see them. While I would be the first to admit that we need to see a greater co-operation among true believers of different denominations, I also believe that, in this sin filled world, these denominations may be necessary for a greater harmony within the larger body of Christ. We have better things to do than constantly lock horns and fight with each other.

Have you ever taught a children's club where two children could not get along? What do you do? You separate them and place them with children they can get along with and continue your teaching. Separation is sometimes the best route to greater unity. You may even find that you get along much better with a person if you are not having to work side by side with him or her on a regular basis. Sometimes church splits are God's way of creating greater unity in the body.

While it is true that sometimes the reason we cannot get along is because of pride, jealousy or an unwillingness to forgive, there are other times when we simply do things in a different way. I have friends who are very different from me in how they work. They can do many things at once while I tend to focus on one task at a time. While we are great friends and enjoy wonderful fellowship, we work very

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

differently. In fact, we would likely frustrate each other if we were trying to work together.

In Deuteronomy 22:10 we read:

10 You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.

There was a law against making two very different animals work together. The ox was very strong and hard working. The donkey was a weaker, smaller and more stubborn animal. This was their nature. Imagine putting these two animals together to plough a field. The ox would be held back by the donkey and the donkey would be overworked by the ox. This combination of animals was not healthy. What is true of the ox and donkey is also true in the church. God has made us different one from the other. These differences are not sinful but they can make it difficult for certain people to work together. Sometimes the only Biblical solution is to separate people whose personalities and work style clash so that they will not frustrate or hold each other back. We need to distinguish sometimes between sinful attitudes that keep us from working together and God-given gifts and personalities that clash because we are all different.

What I am trying to say in this chapter is that division is not always a bad thing. Just like a plant sometimes needs to be uprooted and divided for its greater health so it is sometimes with the local church.

I was watching a documentary on a forest fire that took place some years ago in Australia. The team documented the fire and the aftermath of this fire over the coming years. While the fire destroyed vast expanses of forest, they discovered that in the coming years the forest grew back and

Is There a Positive Side to Church Splits?

was much healthier than it has been before the fire. In fact, seeds of plants that had been dormant for years, now were coming to life and being seen again in the forest. This forest fire was for the ultimate good of the forest. God will sometimes purge His church. He will remove the old stagnant growth and give new life. He will renew His people's commitment to His Word. He will expand His workforce. Church splits are not always negative. They can be a very effective tool in the hands of a Sovereign God to purify, mature, and make His church more useful for the sake of His kingdom.

For Consideration:

- How did God purify the nation of Israel in Exodus 32? How does He purify the church in our day?
- How did God use the split between Barnabas and Paul to multiply His missionary force? Can He do this today in the church?
- Is it possible that creating groups of like-minded believers could potentially bring greater unity to the overall body of Christ? While we worship in different churches, what can we do to more fully recognize our unity as true believers in Jesus Christ?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to do what He needs to do to purify the church of our day?
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the churches in your region that preach the truth about Jesus

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

Christ. Ask God to help you to accept these believers as your brothers and sisters even though they may differ on some theological points.

- Thank the Lord for the different ways in which He is working through the various Bible believing churches in your community. Thank Him for the people these churches are reaching and the impact they are having for the sake of the kingdom of God.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace as a church to do your part in the expansion of His kingdom. Ask Him to show you the particular role He has for your church.

Chapter 5 - When Division is Inevitable

There may be times when leaving a church is inevitable. The question we need to examine here is what do we do when this is unavoidable? How do we deal with a church split or with an individual who feels compelled to leave our church? When you have come to the place where you believe that there is no other choice, how do you leave your church?

Seek the Lord's Purpose

After Esther married King Xerxes and became queen of Persia, Haman, the king's official, decreed that the Jews be destroyed. King Xerxes agreed to this policy of Haman. We can only imagine how difficult this would have been for Esther, a Jewess. Her own husband had decreed to the destruction of her people. Mordecai, Esther's uncle, however, told her in Esther 4:14: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" Mordecai reminded Esther that the series of events that led up to her becoming the wife of the enemy to her people had not happened by chance. God was working out His purposes and Esther had a very important role to play. Before running away from a difficult situation in your church, consider the advice of Mordecai. Could it be that God has

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

placed you in the church for this very purpose? Could it be that you are to be involved in the process of change in the life of your church?

Seek Reconciliation

In Matthew 18:15-20 the Lord tells us that if a brother or sister sins against us we are to go and speak with him in person about this. If he refuses to listen, we are to take a witness. If he refuses to listen despite the witness, we are to bring him before the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, we are to separate ourselves from him. Too many people leave a church prematurely. They leave without first seeking reconciliation with their brother or sister.

While we can see how this principle applies to individual relationships, how does it apply to a church? If your church is wandering from the principles of the Word of God, maybe the first step, would be to go to the leadership and express your concern. If the leadership refuses to listen, take someone else with you and speak again to them on this issue. If they refuse to listen, you may have recourse to either a higher court in the church or the head office of your denomination. If even after these efforts, they refuse to listen you may have legitimate reason to leave.

Maybe you belong to a denomination which has recently made a decision that is contrary to the teaching of the word of God. What happens if your concern is with the denomination as a whole? How does Matthew 18 apply in this case? Where do you go when there is no higher church authority to which we can turn? Possibly the first step, according to Matthew 18 would be to express your concern as a local church to your denomination. If they do not listen find other local churches and believers of the same de-

When Division is Inevitable

nomination who will stand with you. If even then they refuse to listen, once again, depending on the nature of the issue, you may have cause to leave.

What is important is that before leaving, you seek to work out the issue with your brothers or sisters. Maybe the Lord will use you to bring the change needed.

Leading, not Reacting

Very often, in church conflicts, people are hurt and react out of bitterness and revenge. It is important that we seek to avoid this at all costs. In conflicts, we ought not to be seeking to prove our point. First and foremost on our minds must be the glory of God. How can you tell if you are truly seeking the glory of God? Probably the easiest way is to examine your own attitudes and actions. If we are seeking the glory of God in the church, we will begin by examining our own hearts. I have seen too many dirty fights in the church by people who claim to be seeking the glory of God. Is God glorified when your attitude is not that of Christ? Is God glorified when believer devours believer in the name of Christ? If your attitude is not right toward your brother, then you are not glorifying God. Jesus tells us:

(Mat 25:40 NIV) 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

If you are seeking the glory of God in the conflict, you will be seeking His will not your own. You will also demonstrate the attitude of Him who loved you and died for you when you were His enemy. You will follow the leading of the Spirit and not react out of bitterness or desire for revenge.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

Actively Seek the Good of Your Brothers and Sisters

Listen to the King James rendering of Matthew 5:44:

(Mat 5:44 KJV) But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

In this translation, there are four things we are commanded to do for our enemies. We are to love our enemies. The greatest example of this is the example of Christ and how He was willing to die for us even though we were His enemies. We are challenged here to follow His example.

The verse also commands us to bless those who curse us. The word bless in the Greek language is “eulogeo.” From this word, we get the word “eulogy.” The actual word comes from two other Greek words: “eu” meaning “good or well” and “logos” meaning “words.” If you put these words together you get the idea of speaking well of or praising someone. God is telling us to speak well of our enemies. While we may not appreciate what they stand for, we are to look beyond this evil and see the good. We are to banish any angry and bitter words about them or to them. Our words to them and about them are to be seasoned with grace, forgiveness, compassion and love.

The third thing we are commanded to do is to do good to our enemies. Our brother or sister may not want to accept our gesture of love but we are commanded to offer it to them. This means that we are to actively seek to bless and honour our brother or sister, even when we have been hurt by them.

When Division is Inevitable

The final challenge of this verse is to pray for our enemies. This must be seen in the light of the other commands. God is not telling us here that we are to pray for their destruction and speedy judgement. We are challenged to seek the good of our enemies even in prayer. Pray for the blessing of the Lord to fall on those who disagree with you. Pray that they would come to an understanding of the Lord's will and be showered with His abundance and goodness.

This verse tells us that we are to actively seek the good of our enemies. This is radically different from what we see in the average church split. As we go through the division and conflict, we are to be asking the question: How can I seek the good of those who disagree with me? This is contrary to everything that is natural to us. If we wish to glorify God in our church conflict, however, we will be seeking His enabling in this matter. Isn't that what Christ did for us?

Legal Matters

In 1 Corinthians 6:1-7 Paul speaks out against the practice of believers filing lawsuits against other believers in the secular courts. He tells them that it would be better to be wronged and cheated than to devour each other before the unbeliever. Horrible things have been done in the name of Christ. Whether it is over the matter of who keeps the church building or what to do with the finances, the fighting can become very dirty. Paul warns us against this. As believers, we represent the name of Christ. Even in our conflicts we can show the world that Jesus is alive and dwells in our hearts. What does it do for the testimony of the Church when the world sees believers steeped in greed and bitterness? While there is from time to time the need to understand proper legal procedure, we should be very careful about taking our fellow believers to court. Be willing to suffer loss, rather than cast a shadow upon the name of

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

Christ in your community. Even in a church split, the glory of God must be our greatest preoccupation.

Expect a Response

Don't be surprised if people respond negatively to you. In some cases people may not speak to you. In other cases, they may say things behind your back. Sometimes people will have their own idea as to why you left your church. You may not be understood at all. In these cases, lovingly forgive and actively seek the good of those who speak about you. Remember that, ultimately, you must answer to God alone. What others think about you is unimportant compared to what God thinks. The Lord understands what you are going through. Listen to the counsel He gives in Matthew 5:11,12:

(Mat 5:11-12 NIV) "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. (12) Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If you have been seeking the will of the Lord in this matter, obedient to His Word and seeking His glory, then rejoice that you have been found worthy to suffer for His name. Have you ever met a war veteran who returned home with battle scars? Have you ever heard him speak with pride about his wounds? He considers it an honour to be able to bear the marks on his body of faithfulness to his country. How much more is this true for those of us who suffer for the cause of Christ. Don't be surprised if you are not understood. Seek the glory of God and His will and concern yourself very little with what others may think.

When Division is Inevitable

In this world, we can expect disagreements and conflict. There will be times when, like Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 we will have to separate from brother and sister for the greater glory of our heavenly Father. What is important when this is inevitable, is that we do so with grace, forgiveness and love. There are times when this will be very difficult, but our commitment in these times of division is to honour Christ in our heart, actions and attitudes.

For Consideration:

- Why is it important to seek the will of the Lord in our church conflicts before leaving? What was the advice of Mordecai to Esther?
- What does Matthew 18:15-20 teach us about the steps we should take towards being reconciled with a brother or sister?
- What is the normal response to church conflict? What kind of response does God want us to have toward those who differ from us or hurt us? See Matthew 5:44.
- Could it be that the greatest battle in any church conflict is not so much with a brother or sister but with ourselves, our attitudes and responses to this conflict? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to seek His heart before you leave any situation. Ask Him if it is His

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

purpose that you leave or be an agent for positive change.

- Do you have a conflict with a brother or sister in Christ? Ask the Lord to give you His heart for that brother or sister. Ask God to help you to love and forgive them as He loved and forgave you.
- Ask God to examine your heart to see if there are any attitudes that do not honour Him. Confess these attitudes to Him and ask Him to change them.

Chapter 6 - Healing from a Church Split

One of the problems with church splits is that people can go through the rest of their lives filled with bitterness and hurt. I have never met anyone who has had to leave his or her church due to serious disagreements who has not been hurt in some way by the whole process. For the most part, these individuals are left to bandage their wounds by themselves. Many times the pain associated with their old church is hidden but not healed. From time to time it resurfaces in bitterness or anger. Generally, however, these individuals busy themselves with their new church and keep their pain buried well beneath the surface. In this concluding chapter I would like to give a few guidelines to begin the process of healing from a church split.

Try to Understand your Brother's Perspective

Some time ago I was involved with a church that had broken away from their denomination. This had happened some years before I arrived. I learned later that one of the results of this split was a letter sent by the local leadership of the original church to other churches of the same denomination in their area indicating that no one from this new breakaway group was to preach in their churches.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

The action only served to strengthen animosity between people on both sides.

Some years later, I was asked by one of the churches in the original denomination to preach in the absence of a pastor. I was only too happy to help in this way, but eventually found myself in the middle of this debate. Despite the blessing of the Lord on the work, I was removed from the pulpit. Admittedly, I initially felt a certain bitterness, because I had had nothing to do with the split between these two churches. My desire was simply to help a church without a pastor. As I reflected on this decision, however, and tried to put myself in the shoes of the leadership of the original denomination, I began to understand why they chose this route. The church split had been quite messy. The denomination was simply protecting themselves from any potential problems. Understanding this perspective helped me to have a better attitude towards them.

I would like you to think back in time to when you were a child. Do you remember how unfair and hard you thought your parents were when they required certain things from you or demanded that you restrict the amount of time you did the things you enjoyed? When we grow up and have our own children, we understand more fully why our parents did the things they did. It is not until we face a similar situation with our own children that we understand why our parents made these decisions.

Take the time to try and look at the perspective of those you perceive to be your enemies. You may be surprised to discover that you agree in essence with their actions. A vital part of the healing process is to try to understand the perspective of your brother or sister.

Don't Judge Your Brother's Motives and Intentions

(1 Corinthians 4:5 NIV) Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

The apostle Paul tells us in this verse that the judging of motives and intentions does not belong to us but to God. None of us know what truly motivates the actions of our brother or sister. The Bible commentator Matthew Henry says this about judging someone else's motives:

We make ourselves our brethren's masters, and do in effect usurp the throne of God, when we take upon us thus to judge them, especially to judge their thoughts and intentions, which are out of our view. (*Henry, Matthew, Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. VI, Acts to Revelation: New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, pg. 475.*)

To judge the motives and intentions of our fellow human beings is to take God's place. Only God has the right to judge these intentions because only He can see into the human heart. Often, however, we judge our fellow human being based on what we perceive to be his or her intentions.

We are quick to say that our enemies are acting out of bitterness, greed or anger, but do we really know this? Could it be that we have misjudged our enemy? Only God knows his or her true motives. It is not for us to judge what we do not know. It is very important that we deal with any such judgmental attitudes.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

Don't condemn your enemy for something you have no way of proving. If you have been guilty of this, confess it as sin to God. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:5: "judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts (NIV)." When you find yourself judging the motives and intentions of you brother or sister, confess this to God and ask Him for grace to leave this in His hands.

Forgive

What does it mean to forgive your brother? When someone offends you, they place themselves in your debt. To forgive such a person is to release them from any debt they may owe you because of the pain or difficulty they have caused. When you release them, you are in reality saying: "I will never ask you to pay for what you have done. I will never hold what you have done against you." This does not mean that you no longer feel pain over what you have suffered. Nor does this mean that you naively believe that they could never do it again. You may even take precautionary measures to assure that your brother or sister does not repeat his or her offense. If you have truly forgiven, however, you will treat them as if they had committed no offense whatsoever against you. Their actions towards you will not influence how you lovingly respond to them.

To hold someone accountable to us for what they have done is to tie ourselves to them. There are many people who are so weighted down demanding that people pay for what they have done to them that they cannot move forward themselves. One of the most important steps toward recovery from a church split is to set our brothers and sisters free from whatever debt we perceive they owe us. To

Healing from a Church Split

set them free is to free ourselves to move on into whatever the Lord has for us.

Reject Negative Talk and Thoughts

Don't allow yourself the privilege of thinking wrong thoughts and speaking accusing words about your brother or sister. One of the tactics of the enemy is to try to get us to focus on our differences. He delights in having us think negatively about those who have hurt us. When he has succeeded in getting you to think negatively about your brother or sister the next step will be to get you to speak your thoughts to others. The apostle Paul gave this advice to the Philippians:

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things. (Philippians 4, ESV)

Like poison, negative and hateful thoughts can spread from one person to another until entire churches can be contaminated by wrong attitudes. The work of God will be hindered because of this poison. People are hurt in the process and the name of Christ is dishonoured. Don't be responsible for spreading this bitterness through your church and community. Reject these thoughts and attitudes when you first encounter them. To harbour them is to prove that you have never really forgiven your brother. In reality you still want him to pay for what he has done to you. This will not only hurt your brother but it will also drag you down spiritually. Ask the Lord to help you to truly forgive.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

Focus on the Good

Very often we have been so weighted down by the negative side of a church split and division that we fail to see how the Lord has accomplished good out of evil. A church split can give birth to a second church where the presence of God is evidenced in many beautiful ways. The church may grow rapidly. There may be immediate evidence of spiritual growth and renewed excitement about what the Lord can do in their midst. People will come to the Lord and certain ministries will be particularly blessed. In the midst of this, however, there may be those who were still stuck on the past. They had never really gotten over the pain associated with the split from their former church. They cannot rejoice in the expansion of the Kingdom of God and the work He had chosen to do.

There are people who so dwell on the difficulties of the past that they can never enjoy the blessings of the present. Are you in this situation? Stop for a moment and look around you. Consider the blessings of the Lord. He tells us that all things work together for good if you love God (see Romans 8.28). What good has God accomplished? Make a list of these blessings. When you are tempted to dwell on the negative, consider the blessings of God. Instead of being discouraged, take a moment to praise the Lord for His goodness and sovereignty in your situation. It is hard to remain discouraged when we see the evidence of God's good hand in our difficulties.

Take your emotions with you

When you leave your church, take your emotions with you. Very often while our physical presence is removed, we leave our emotions in our former church. It has never ceased to amaze me to see how upset people who have

Healing from a Church Split

left a church can get when the church they left makes a decision they do not like. The church down the street can make the same decision and it wouldn't bother them in the least. The problem is that they have not completely cut their ties to their former church. Have you ever noticed that you have more patience with someone else's children than your own? The reason for this has to do with our emotional ties to our children. We take what our children do very personally. We feel that they are acting on our behalf. They represent us in their unruly behaviour. We become angered because what they do reflects on us.

In the same way, we become emotionally attached to our church. What our church does reflects on us. The hardest part of leaving a church is to take our emotional attachments with us. Even though we are now a member of another church we still feel that the actions of our former church reflect upon us. This leads to bitterness and anger.

Transferring your emotional allegiance to your new church is not always easy, especially if you have fond memories of your former church and its members. It is necessary, however, for complete healing. This does not mean that you cannot remember the good you experienced in your old church. It is good to remember with thankfulness, the blessings of the past, but don't stop there. God's purposes are still being worked out in the present. You will yet have much for which to praise the Lord.

Even as we must set our children free when they reach the age of maturity, we must hand over the reins to those who remain in our old church. We are no longer accountable for what they do. Their actions no longer reflect upon us. Like our children who have left the nest, while we are still concerned, and while our prayers are always with them, they are now accountable for their own actions.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

See your Brother and Sister as God see Them

There are times when we need to step back from a situation to be more objective. Sometimes we have difficulty loving those who have offended us. For healing to take place, it is necessary to ask yourself the question: "How does the Lord see those brothers and sisters that have offended you?" Has He stopped loving them? Doesn't He extend His forgiveness and compassion to them as well as to you and I?"

Seeing our brothers and sisters as Christ sees them is a vital part of healing. It requires a deep commitment on our part to reject false and harmful thinking and confess it to God. It may require much prayer and seeking God for the ability to see those who have offended us through His eyes. God expects us to swallow our pride and chose to love as He loves; to forgive as He forgives; to bless as He blesses.

Seek the Good of Those Who Have Offended You

Jeremiah 29 contains a copy of a letter the prophet sent to those who had gone into exile in Babylon. These individuals had just been through a horrible ordeal. Their land and their homes had been taken from them. They had been removed from their land and taken by force to a foreign country where they were being held as prisoners. There was very likely a certain amount of bitterness in their hearts towards their enemies the Babylonians. To these exiles, Jeremiah the prophet writes:

(Jeremiah 29:4-7 NIV) (4) This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: (5) "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat

Healing from a Church Split

what they produce. (6) Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. (7) Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

God expected that His people become model citizens in the land of their captivity. They were to seek the peace and prosperity of their enemy's cities, for in their prosperity they too would prosper. This is a lesson we cannot afford to miss. The Word of God exhorts us to love our enemies (see Matthew 5:43). Jeremiah tells his people that they would prosper only as they sought to bless their enemies.

The negative attitudes we have towards those who have offended us will only bring us spiritual poverty. Do you want to prosper spiritually? Cast aside your bitterness and pride. Ask the Lord what you can do to seek the good of your enemy. Ask Him to open your eyes to their needs and reach out in love. Pray for them and seek God's richest blessing for them. You are not the only one who is hurting. They also feel the pain of separation and division. Make it your desire to see them healed and restored so that they can become everything God intends them to be. Do this in the strength the Lord provides. Let His love fill you to overflowing. Let it flow like oil over those who have offended you. This is the only route to full healing in your life, in the life of your church, and in the life of those who have offended you.

Wounded Hearts and Empty Pews

For Consideration:

- How does understanding our brother's or sister's perspective help us to be more gracious and forgiving?
- How does an unforgiving spirit harm the person who has refused to forgive?
- Have you ever chosen to dwell on negative thoughts toward your brothers or sisters? What does this say about what you think of them?
- How important is transferring our emotional allegiance? What is the difference between being concerned for a brother or sister and being emotionally attached to them?
- How does seeking the good of our brother who has offended us bring healing to both him and yourself?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to ask the Lord to examine your heart for any ungracious thoughts toward a brother or sister who may have offended you in the past. Ask Him to give you grace to forgive.
- Ask the Lord to help you to see your brother or sister as He sees them.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from any unhealthy emotional ties to those who have hurt you. Ask Him to show you the balance between concern and unhealthy emotional ties.

Healing from a Church Split

- Have you been offended by someone or hurt by a situation in life? Take a moment to thank the Lord that He is a sovereign God who promises to work out all things for our good. Ask Him to open your eyes to the good He will accomplish through your circumstance.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely or at cost price to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

These books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books? For more information about Light To My Path Book Distribution visit our website at <http://ltmp-homepage.blogspot.ca>