

TAKING OVER A CHURCH

Some of the most tragic stories come when a new pastor takes a pulpit. In something as brief as this article, there is no way that I could deal with all of the situations that could arise, but I would like to at least address the outward needs and perhaps a few mistakes that one can easily make.

As Independent Baptists, we have strong feelings and opinions. We are not run by a denomination, and therefore, our freedom brings great diversity. In spite of that freedom, we still have obligations and responsibilities.

1. Our first and foremost responsibility is to honor and glorify Jesus Christ.

We must be very careful that whatever we do does not bring dishonor to the Name of Jesus Christ. To glorify God ought to be our focal point in every decision we make. In Philippians 1:20, Paul said, "...Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death."

We can not allow anything else to come before that.

2. Our next loyalty should be to the people who are there in the church. Those people have trusted the new pastor with their spiritual well-being. They are bringing in someone to whom they are entrusting church finance, the youth department, the children ministries, and to a large extent, their rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. What the average believer does in his church will determine much of what he receives in the way of rewards at the Judgment Seat. A pastor who causes great tragedy or drives people out of church causes eternal harm to the people who entrusted him with their spiritual future.

3. I believe he owes some measure of loyalty to former church members. As we consider the Judgment Seat of Christ, I think we should consider those who are already in Heaven whose money helped build the buildings we use. It was the faithful giving and loyal service of countless people that allowed this new pastor a pulpit in which to preach. Everything this new preacher has in his new position was as a result of the love and faithfulness not only of God, but also of these great people God used. Although these people are in Heaven, their investment in eternity and their reward from this investment have not yet been completely paid.

4. If the church has a successful past and has been doing well during recent years -- seeing people saved and keeping the church bills paid -- then the new preacher should do all his power to change as little as possible. As much as possible, he should keep the same staff, the same people in leadership, and the same direction philosophically. The old adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is not only logical, but it is honorable. The actions of a new man voted in by a certain type of people who then watch this new man completely change the direction of leadership or program of their church is considered disloyalty to those who hired him.

It is unfair (and I believe unrighteous) to take a position and the authority that accompanies that position, which is freely given to a new pastor, and then to violate the ideals of the very people who are paying his salary.

5. If there is a need for something to be changed, and if the former pastor left on a good note with a good church, then it would be wise to seek counsel from the former pastor. If the former pastor left the church under difficult circumstances, it is still always wise to seek the counsel of an older, successful pastor, especially one who has knowledge of the church the new pastor now leads.

6. If the new pastor is taking over a church that has been through some difficult times, there are many things he should consider:

- a. Realize these people have been hurt, and that hurt will not be clearly understood for some time.

- b. Just because a person holds a position of leadership does not mean that he was not hurt by the former pastor or the circumstances that caused him to leave.

- c. When a new pastor comes in, people will put on their best face, and he will not be able to read the true heart-feelings for some time.

- d. Every area of the church will be hurt in a different way -- the youth department will hurt differently than the senior citizens; the bus ministry, both workers and riders, will be hurt differently from those in an adult Sunday school class. The new pastor will have to wait graciously and will need to patiently wade through things. Many months or years into his pastorate, he should understand that things may come up as a result of people still being wounded.

- e. The new pastor should not expect loyalty immediately. He will have to stay long enough to prove that he is not what the former pastor was, and for many people, he will have to stay a long time after that period of time to prove that he is worthy of trust.

f. Be it handling finances or making decisions, the new pastor will need to allow the church to walk slowly to a world of trust, loyalty, faithfulness, and giving.

7. When taking over a new church, there is someone who loves every area of ministry. In fact, there is someone who loves every piece of furniture. If the organ is replaced by the keyboard, somebody will be offended. If the white piano is replaced by the black piano, somebody who helped pay for that piano could get angry at you. These situations can happen in a healthy church or in a wounded church.

8. Change is a difficult and, at times, a dangerous thing. Do your best to change as few leaders and as few ministries as possible. Going back to the very beginning of this article and the issue of loyalty to those who called you, it would be unwise to come in and dismiss a staff member or change a direction of a ministry simply because it is not what you feel is the best way to operate.

9. Dr. Jack Hyles told us that, in most cases, it is advisable to lay all your cards out on the table before you take a pulpit. Bro. Hyles made it very clear, not with starting a church, but when taking a pulpit which another pastor left, the new man should explain very clearly what he believes. He should explain what his goals and objectives would be, his standard of dress and his stand on the Bible, his convictions of soul winning -- everything that could create tension, division, or an awkward moment should all be laid out very clearly, probably in writing before the pastor allows a church to vote on his taking the pulpit.

10. You do not have to insist that all these happen immediately, but let the people know what kind of person he is and what his beliefs are that they are calling to pastor their church.

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