

## Time to Rebuild: When Do You Quit?

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I know, I know... usually we try to give you more than two weeks to recover anytime I preach on a Sunday morning, but we're in an exceptional situation today! I think more than 2/3rds of our staff are in Gatlinburg this weekend with the TN Christian Teen Convention, so if you've been planning a coup of any sort, you've likely got us outnumbered and today's probably your day to shine.

We've started a new series out of Nehemiah entitled ***Time to Rebuild***. Last week Andy introduced with the topic "Where Does Change Begin" wading into the book of Nehemiah with all the vengeance of a History professor... Man, he laid down some serious dates! Today I'm coming in with a fairly different approach, and my topic is ***"When Do You Quit?"***

In fact, today is probably much less like a traditional sermon-style message, and much more simply me talking to you from personal experience. I realize most people's interest in my personal experience wanes before I can tell my full name. Today, however, ushers have secured all exits for the next 30 minutes, so you may as well settle in for the duration.

It would be natural to start with my start, the upside being that I was such a cute kid!

**SLIDE: YoungKeith Pic** The downside being that covers a LOT of years, so we'll only hail so far back as, say, 10 years ago...

**SLIDE: 2009Buds Pic** The upside being that my decaying aesthetics are balanced nicely by my gorgeous wife!

11 years ago, this month I met with the leadership of the church where I served in Chattanooga, and we determined that our paths were diverging; we wanted different things. I wanted to be serving on staff in a church determined to serve God and share His salvation with a lost and dying world. The church leadership

wanted that for me, as well, they just thought it should be in another zip code, and they gave me 6 months to figure out where that would be.

I found myself in a difficult position, and to be honest, I felt betrayed by people that I loved and trusted within the church, but as very few people within the congregation knew my circumstance, I worked to continue serving well and in a way that would not indicate that I would soon be gone. And with a wounded heart I determined that I almost certainly did not belong in youth ministry any longer. In fact, after 13 years of ministry there, the idea of moving into ministry with another church and starting the whole process over left me feeling fatigued. **I decided it was time to quit.**

One problem with that... almost all of my career experience was in Youth Ministry. Compounding that problem was that my 4-year degree in Bible and Ministry was with a college that had really wanted to be accredited, but was never quite able to pull it off; meaning that in the world's eyes, I didn't actually have a degree at all!

So, I came up with a magnificent plan: I would transfer my degree to a sister academic institution that WAS accredited, and who would recognize my degree, and would pursue their program to earn a Master's degree in education, and would be able to teach in the secular field! Genius!! And the Adult Education director at said institution agreed that it was a magnificent plan, so we began the paperwork and steps to get that done.

All I needed was my SAT/ACT records. No problem! Except, there WAS a problem. I didn't have any of those records. Everything from my educational years had been lost in a house disaster. No problem; reach out to the SAT/ACT organization. Except there WAS a problem. They couldn't seem to find any record of my taking the test. (I distinctly remember taking the test in a large room full of students at Lindenwood College, and scoring well. Uh... very well REALLY well! Yeah, super really well, aced it actually! 0.o)

No problem! Just take it again! Except ARE YOU KIDDING ME??? And it seemed that no matter how good the plan was, or what I tried towards this plan, the door would get slammed in my face. And in my short-sightedness and predetermined direction, it just added to my misery.

So I looked elsewhere for opportunities where my lack of degree or lack of professional training for anything BUT ministry would give me a chance. Not a lot of that going around, not for me, at least. **But I knew I needed to quit**, so I kept looking, kept broadening my search parameters, kept stretching further and further out in desperation.

Working as a group coordinator with a retreat center! Not enough experience. Working as a University Campus Minister! Too old for one, didn't play enough golf for another. I searched for ministry positions other than Youth Ministry that seemed to make sense for me, but there was always something lacking, something in the way, and the rejection continued to pile on, convincing me more and more that I was not cut out to be in ministry any longer, that a 25-year career was my expiration date. **I knew when to quit.**

One day I checked the ministry listings to see that a church which met in an elementary school in Spring Hill, Tennessee was looking for a youth minister. I was fairly convinced that I wasn't supposed to be in ministry any longer, or at least not in YOUTH ministry. I could see it playing out in my mind, some church elders somewhere walking into the youth group room to announce that they had found the students a new youth minister, and in walks, not a cool just-out-of-college guy who created his own music app, but a 40-something... OK, UPPER 40-something guy smelling of desperation and rejection. I did some cursory research into the position, but mostly I knew it was **time for me to quit**, so I told God that if He wanted me in Spring Hill He would have to do it Himself.

**When Do You Quit is at first glance a pretty tough one to answer.** When you ask it like that, it's fairly difficult to find a good Biblical example of when quitting makes sense. In fact, Biblical history tends to turn that question upside down and inside out!

When do you quit? If you ask me, it's when you're nothing more than a wine butler/poison tester for a king whose country has conquered yours and turned your people into servants. But if you ask Nehemiah, that's the perfect time to pack your bags to act on an impossible plan!

When do you quit? If you ask me, it's when you have a group of 300 soldiers to meet an enemy force that outnumbers you 100-1! But if you ask Gideon, that's the ideal time to strike!

When do you quit? If you ask me, it's when you've been beaten half-dead by your own family and sold to foreigners as a slave, then framed and thrown into slave-prison, forgotten by even the other slaves you have selflessly aided. But if you ask OT Joseph, that's when you comb your hair and get ready to run the country!

When do you quit? If you ask me, it's when you've been arrested and thrown into prison for telling people how to escape eternal damnation, and where to turn for eternal life. But if you ask Paul and Silas, that's when you get ready for yet another salvation presentation, this time to the jailer in charge of keeping you locked up, so he can take you to his house to baptize his family.

When do you quit? If you ask me, it's when you've been arrested, humiliated, lied about, tried unjustly, tortured nearly to death, and then nailed to a cross and crucified. But if you ask Jesus, or any of those who witnessed His so-called "Death" on Calvary, that's when you kick off the plan to save the World!

It doesn't make sense, but oddly enough, not making sense, well that just means it's working!

**SLIDE:**

**The foolish things of God are wiser than human wisdom. The weakness of God is stronger than human strength.**

■ **1 Corinthians 1:25**

**When do you quit?** When you think about it carefully, you just might find that the question is best answered by another time-tested, oft-repeated question that might be much more familiar to you: **How Do I Know God's Will?** Isn't that really the question here? For the believer who wants to operate within the Will of God, knowing when to quit, or when to push ahead, always comes down to knowing what direction God wants you to take. With that in mind, I'm going to give you a series of steps that you can use when trying to determine just how God would direct you in your decision making and obedience, and against which you can test your plans, to make sure they are worth pursuing.

*Note: looking up “Steps for knowing God’s will” on the internet throws you into a sort of bidding war: 9 steps for knowing, no 8 steps, no 7 steps, how about 6 steps!... I found an article by Dr. Dr. R. B. Ouellette, and with minor modifications, I’m sticking with his alliteration!*

**SLIDE: 1) Commitment to God’s Will**

You’ve got to ask yourself a question (“Do I feel lucky?”) “Am I really looking for God’s direction so that I can take it?” There is a significant different between that, and in looking with a hope that you can get God’s backing for something you’re already planning to do. Perhaps, secretly (don’t tell God, ok?) you’re planning to do it, regardless, even! When searching for God, make sure you’ve capitalized His name. You know what? While you’re capitalizing, go ahead and hit all three letters! Make sure you are prepared to treat God as just that: GOD, and not as a Celestial Magic 8-Ball.

**SLIDE: Commit your way to the LORD;**

**trust in Him and He will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,**

**your vindication like the noonday sun. –Psalm 37:5-6**

**SLIDE: 2) Consistency with God’s Word**

You cannot pursue the Will of God in any way that violates the Word of God. Sure, you’d love to strangle the life out of that idiot in the bright green car that’s weaving in and out of traffic on I-65, except that short section in the Commandments says you can’t. Yeah, you’d love to cuss out whoever left that shopping cart pushed right up against the new scratch in your car’s paint job, but then you’re supposed to have a gentle spirit and not use coarse language. Perhaps you’d like to do something mean to whoever drank your last Diet Dew in the church drink cooler... well, actually that one’s OK.

**SLIDE: Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path. – Psalm 119:105**

Years ago, I was counseling a young dating couple who revealed to me that they were expecting a child. They said that they would read the Bible together, and it made them feel so close that one thing led to another and... Apparently, they weren't reading the right sections. You cannot search for God's will in areas that He has already declared to be out of bounds, even when it "feels" so right. Never forget that feelings can be thrown off by something as simple as a cheap burrito.

SLIDE: **3) Counsel from Wise People**

This is one of my favorites: Identify people in your life who are quite obviously getting it right, and ask for their advisement! For their input. Be smart in whose counsel you are seeking. I'll be frank here: Now that I'm working with the Prime adults, our "age 55+" crew, I'm finding that the advice I'm getting is far superior to what I was getting from the middle school girls' class!! Look for men and women who reflect a Godly lifestyle, who are sound in their beliefs and practices. People of integrity who wear the same face in private that they wear in public.

SLIDE: **Plans fail for lack of counsel,  
but with many advisers they succeed. – Proverbs 15:22**

And unless you're looking for fashion advice or where to get a nice burger and fries, you might even consider searching outside your immediate circle of friends. Some of your friends might go way to easy on you! Look for those who have experience beyond your own, who might be willing to give you Godly advice, even if it might mean you will be hearing something you don't particularly want to hear.

SLIDE: **4) Conviction of Heart & Mind**

On some days dealing with personal desires is awfully tricky landscape to maneuver through. Sometimes the one you're getting the worst advice from is the voice in your own head! Can you recall any times when you wanted something so badly that you ended up telling yourself little lies to help justify going where you wanted to go, doing what you wanted to do? And even as you began to take that wrong course, something in your heart was telling you it wasn't right. Your mind may have started in with a second little voice advising that you were making a stupidly terrible mistake. Those are often tells that you are making, what we in the business call, a stupidly terrible mistake.

SLIDE: **Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. – Colossians 3:15**

To be honest, that passage may be directed more towards always working to get along with other members of God's family, yet the importance of maintaining the Peace of Christ in your heart has merit. And if that isn't enough, just jump down to verse 17:

SLIDE: **<sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

In my experience, traveling in a direction contrary to God will not let you remain at peace, and it's flat impossible to go against God while doing so in the name of the Lord Jesus. Sometimes the boat is rocking because someone is trying to pull you to safety, and save you from the rocks ahead.

SLIDE: **5) Concentration on God's Voice**

I'll start this off by admitting something: I've never heard God speak to me in an audible way. About two years ago I did receive a telegram from God addressed to all of His most faithful & beloved followers, and you know what it said? Yeahhh... I didn't think so.

But when you learn to find a place that contributes to you being able to focus, and pray, and wait, you may start to feel His direction in your life more and more often. You may be begging "hearing" God, if not audibly, through the words of the Godly people around you, through open doors and opportunities, even towards the leanings of your heart. Praying is certainly one of those conducive practices. The difficult thing may be setting time aside to do just that, and to add in the time for the quiet waiting, listening. It's quite difficult these days to wait quietly for anything!

Even in the account, or perhaps PARTICULARLY in the account of Nehemiah, we see him doing just that:

SLIDE: **When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven. Nehemiah 1:4**

For days, Nehemiah **prayed**. But you didn't let the other thing slip past, did you? He also ***fasted***. This practice has always been at the forefront in the lives of people who were truly seeking direction from God when making decisions of great importance, and for a good reason! Mess with my menu, and you will get my attention! Talk about voices in your head... skip a few meals and you may end up in an ongoing debate with your stomach about your decision-making skills! But partner that with prayer, and you find yourself in a very focused place, set far apart from your normal routine, your thoughtless schedule, your living a life totally in your own control. In our rich, overloaded culture, *Doing Without* can provide a powerful perspective! It can enhance your humility as you approach God. It can highlight your dependence upon God as you make your requests. These are worthwhile tools to add to your Discipleship bag!

As for my personal journey, I know you must be wondering whatever happened with that position in Spring Hill. Well, I hate to ruin the surprise, but I guess you deserve to hear how it played out.

I looked and looked, daily for 6 months, for a way to quit. And to be quite honest, I'd have probably had a better time of it if I had followed the 5 steps we've just outlined. But I was tired and feeling a bit sorry for myself, and was a lot more like Elijah under the juniper tree than like a faithful disciple ready to follow God's leading.

And so I took my Chattanooga youth group on our last big event, a weeklong tour performing at camps and churches. And at a place called White Mills Christian Camp, the camp manager, Ben Fulcher, asked me as I prepared to head for home with my students, "Would you mind if I pass your name along to a minister friend of mine? They're looking for a youth minister."

"Sure," I said, "where's it at?"

"Spring Hill, TN."

I slumped over the wheel for a second. Funny, God. Hi-Larious. Within the week I was on the phone with the preacher at the church in Spring Hill, who confided in me that he wasn't sure there was much point in talking, as they had narrowed their candidates down to two, but he didn't want to ignore the recommendation of a Godly friend. So, we talked for about an hour.

And we're still talking these days, almost every day. And I love it. God has blessed Shari & I with 10 years of wonderful people, wonderful friendships, that we never would have had, had I quit when it seemed to make sense. We have been so blessed to see people who are deeply wise in their decision-making skills, deeply Christ-like in their daily living skills, and to count them among our fellow-laborers in Christ. We were blessed to be a part of a youth group that has grown through the years, and continues to grow in depth of discipleship as well as in the number of new faces appearing on our campus.

**SLIDE: TCTC Prayer Graphic**

This morning over 100 of those students, as well as a great group of adult leaders, are in Gatlinburg for the Tennessee Christian Teen Convention. They've overcome some hurdles, including snow, road conditions, and health issues. They are participating in their final session this morning along with thousands of other attendees. So, before we QUIT this morning, I'd like to ask you to pray with me for what God is doing in their hearts, as well as for their safe return home to share it all with us!