

Should I Move For a Church or Plant One?

by Justin Trevino, *Interview*

James: At the Fellowship Conference, I sat down with Justin Trevino, who years ago considered moving for a church, but instead, he remained in Las Cruces, New Mexico and planted a church. I wanted to hear from him about how the Lord brought this about in order to help others who are in a similar situation, and asking the question of, should I move for a church or plant a church? I started out by asking him to share his testimony of how the Lord saved him.

Justin: I grew up in a Catholic home, very religious, very consistently going to church every Sunday. Actually, my great-aunt recalls taking me to church under the age of 5 - weekly mass in the neighborhood mission. And she says, "From an early age, you'd sit up in the very front row and watch that priest talk." I don't remember those days, but she says, "Yeah, you used to do that." I was always attracted to religion. I was attracted to God and spirituality and prayer and works and self-righteousness and earning and doing good in that respect. It wasn't until my junior year of high school when a long-time friend that I had played baseball with began to bring Bible verses on little pieces of paper to me. He'd say, "I'm not trying to change your religion or anything..." I know he was because he loves me. "...But here's a Scripture. That's the name of the book, that's the chapter and that's the verse." And so I'd take it and I'd say, "I'm not interested." But I would hold on to these little post-its and I'd go home in my Catholic Bible and I'd open these things to those passages. And it was just slowly God cutting my heart each time, like, this is what you need. This is what you're lacking. This is what you're missing. At the same time of that occurring, I was going through confirmation in the Catholic church, so I always equate it to when the hole in the wall in Ezekiel's day, when Ezekiel was commanded to look through that hole and to see the different sins going on within the priesthood and stuff like that. It was around that time where I began to see different holes within the Catholic teaching and the Catholic church, and the inconsistencies of those around me. You know, we're all going through confirmation together, but there's no desire for God amongst my friends. And I'm thinking, what's going on here? So, as we're all getting ready to finally go and confess our sins once and for all to the priest, I thought, from everything my friend is sharing with me, there's only one High Priest and that's Christ. So, as my heart's detaching from a works-based righteousness, I realized through my friend that I was completely lost; completely headed to hell; in sin, not right with God. That Christ was the way, the truth, and the life and that no one was getting to the Father but through Him. And honestly, it wasn't an Acts 9 experience for me. I

think Kevin mentioned it a few Fellowship Conferences ago that the wind blows where He wishes and for some, it's a tornado, and for others, it's a gentle breeze. And for me it was a very gentle breeze. One minute, it was just: you're dead, and then you're alive. You're alive and Christ became precious. The Word of God became precious and became my food and my delight, my joy. Sin was suddenly filthy. And my sin in particular was filthy. And my righteousness was infinitely unworthy of God. And I just cast myself upon Christ. I didn't know words like repentance, but I knew that the Lord had turned my heart from sin to righteousness, and sin to pursuing Him and pursuing His Word. So that was all in about May of 2003. I was a junior in high school. It's the greatest thing, obviously, ever was the Lord opening my eyes to Him. To Him.

James: At that point, how much longer was it until you were exposed to more sound doctrine and more sound teaching?

Justin: Yes, so after my conversion in summer 2003, I started joining my friend at a local Bible teaching church. Arminian-type church where salvation was a human decision. It was a work of man. But nevertheless, the Word of God was being taught there systematically through the Bible, so God was giving me a love for His Word through this church and through a faithful pastor who meant well, who loved his people, who loved me, took me under his wing and taught me. He gave me my first study Bible and just really, really pushed me and pressed me to study the Word. But it wasn't until about 2008, so I went about five years into my Christianity where I didn't know just the glory of the Gospel. I knew enough to know that Christ died for my sins, that I was a sinner, that He took my place so that I could go to heaven. And I knew that I was commanded to repent and believe in Christ, in which I believe God granted me repentance and God turned my heart to Him and opened my heart. But it wasn't until about 2008 where I got exposed to Paul Washer on the Internet - the "Shocking Youth Message" that a lot of us have heard. And when I heard that, I thought whatever this man believes, whatever this man is studying, I want to study and I want to know the Bible the way this man knows the Bible. So, there I am. He's preaching in Matthew 7. There I am looking at Matthew 7 in a new light. And so, I went to the HeartCry website and looked at the recommended reading list and later on I discovered that a lot of these men are what someone's calling "reformed" or "Calvinistic" which I had no idea what that meant at the time. And frankly, I didn't care. I just knew that this is solid stuff and it's Scriptural. So, it was about five years before I started listening to men like Paul Washer, John Piper, John MacArthur. I eventually got started listening to illbehonest.com. So it was about five years.

James: What happened to make you realize you maybe needed to leave the church you were a part of and that the issues were not all minor?

Justin: So we left Calvary Chapel actually before the Lord opened my eyes to sound biblical doctrine, which I'm calling reformed theology. The doctrines of grace. We left before just because there was something in my spirit that was wounded every time the pastor would take the entire congregation through the sinner's prayer, and when no one would raise their hand, there was still that: Okay, well, since all of us are saved, let's just thank God now that all of us are saved. And that would always just kind of go against my conscience. Something was alarming my conscience there. So we left a few months before. We left in summer of 2007 right after we got married - Lanae and I. It wasn't until late 2007, 2008 where we were exposed to sound doctrine and just the glorious Gospel that we love and embrace today.

James: So here you are at a point where you left a church. At that point, what did you do? Did you find a church or what happened?

Justin: So, while we were just learning doctrine, learning theology, learning that which is sound, and that which is true, to my shame, I still had a low view of the church. I had a low view of the local church, I should say. I could boast all day in being part of the universal church, but my view of the local church was very, very low because of what I had come out of. We were actually just kind of meeting in a park - rogue - kind of on our own, still teaching the Bible sort of from an Arminian perspective, but just going through the Bible with a few other people who wanted to just meet at the park. So there was no accountability. There was no structure. And when I say structure, I'm talking that which you see in the New Testament with biblical leadership and church discipline and an actual mission to go out and make disciples. None of that. It was just surviving in a park and eventually in a living room. So, yeah, we didn't immediately start looking for a new church in town. It was a few years before we did that.

James: Did you eventually find a church in town?

Justin: We didn't find a church in town. What we did was we waited a few years. We thought that a church was just going to kind of form in our parks and in our living rooms. And we thought it was just going to happen like very organically. But because our views of the local church were still skewed, and because I, at the time, was still avoiding any kind of call to the ministry. I wanted enough to influence people, but not enough to assume full responsibility for those people. Very selfish on my part. Very selfish and unwise.

James: What led you to stay and plant a church instead of moving?

Justin: So around 2011, 2012 is when we hit rock bottom because we weren't looking - we were looking to the Bible as something to teach per se, to survive in our living room with different people there, but we weren't looking to the Bible as far as what should a local church look like. What should the church

look like? What's the mission of the church? None of that. We hit rock bottom in the sense that there was no biblical leadership; there was no accountability, no structure, no form, nothing. There was no order. So we hit rock bottom in our marriage, in our friendships. It's just that everything was falling apart. And so because of the influence that Illbehonest.com had on us at the time, I thought I'm going to call this church and talk to Pastor Tim or anyone who's willing to listen.

I think Tim actually answered the phone that day in God's providence, and he was the one who heard me out, heard the situation, and I was able to just say we're surviving in the living room, but things just aren't happening. We're at our wits end and we're seriously considering moving to San Antonio to join the church. And it was at that point where I still remember his words to this day. He pauses and he says, "Well, brother..." he says, "I don't want you here if the Lord doesn't want you here." And at first I thought, wow, okay. But then because I'd heard plenty of his sermons to know that he's real enough to share that, I knew that there's something to what he's saying. And then it was at that point where he began to ask questions of me. Like, so wait a minute, you're telling me that you have several people in your living room which means that there's a crowd gathered there. You're also telling me that you're teaching them, regardless of whether or not you feel called to teach right now, the fact that you're teaching and they're gathering every week to listen to you, he says, that's hopeful for me on my end to know that; to hear that. And so he says, "Honestly, if you move here, we're probably going to end up training you and sending you back to Las Cruces." And so, I thought to myself, I'd hate to move and then who knows how long it would take and then be sent back to Las Cruces.

So he said, "Brother, I want you to pray about the possibility of staying where you're at. Here's my phone number. Here's my Skype. Here's my email for contact purposes. And if you need encouragement, I'm throwing myself out there as just encouragement as you go through with this. So, that was about a 2 or 3 hour conversation, by the way. So I'm summarizing it all right now. But he basically put himself out there as a help. So we did. We seriously prayed about it. We - I'm talking about my wife and I. We were ready to pack our bags and go. But he said pray about it, which we prayed about it. We sought the Lord. And in seeking the Lord, honestly, I wanted to move. I didn't want to stay. And in seeking the Lord though, I was hoping for an answer that it's going to be clear that you're supposed to move to San Antonio. But in seeking Him and waiting upon Him, together with my wife, it was becoming very clear that we were supposed to stay. I mean, here's help being offered to us. Here's encouragement. Here's everything we were lacking as far as structure and views of the local church. Here it is a phone call away now. So what are we going to do with that now? Are we going to just ignore it? Or take

the hand that's outstretched to help us? It was strange because God's making it very clear. Meanwhile, in my heart, I'm still not wanting ministry. I'm not wanting to engage, because I was at a place of hitting rock bottom as far as my walk - I was discouraged. We were without a church. I just wanted to sit under a leader and sit under teaching because of the state of my own soul. But here we are praying. The Lord's making it clear. And because the Lord made it clear, that was enough for me to say: I, myself, need to get my heart right before the Lord. Not for the sake of pastoring a church, but because I'm a Christian. It was at that point where a love and a desire to serve God's people in faithfully bringing the Word to them every week began to be birthed and to just grow and grow and grow. That's when there was more frequent Skype visits with Tim and phone calls, random emails that I'd ask him questions about. So, yeah.

James: What difficulties have you had in church planting? And where there times you just wanted to give up?

Justin: Difficulties in church planting? I would say, for me, as one myself, I never wanted to be one of those self-appointed men - I think for me, you typically hear of churches planting churches. So, for me, that didn't happen with us. We just kind of came out of the blue and said we're going to plant a church. And so anytime a difficulty would arise, I'd look back at our past and how we got started and say, well, that's why it's not going smoothly was because we don't have a sister church down the road from us sending us and helping us. We're just starting off with no pattern. And Tim was always faithful to remind me that the Bible is your pattern. The Bible is your blueprint. The Bible is that which you're looking for there. And so, other difficulties are people - people that are like me. People that are inconsistent. I'd say one difficulty for me was working a full time job, having, by God's goodness, a growing family of very needy children, and needing a house, and needing a full time job to provide. By the end of that, a long work week, now the thought of when everyone's going to rest for the weekend and leisure and vacation and relax, now, for me, mentally and spiritually, now the greatest work begins. As I'm on my way home, I'm thinking, alright, I'm so glad it's Friday, but then it's like, wow, the work is beginning now. The burden is descending. Where are we going to be at in the Word this week? "Lord, what do You want to say to Your people this week?" begins... And so, you know, full time ministry, also full time vocation/job, that can be very discouraging. That's a difficult thing. You're feeling guilt for not being there for the people as much as you'd like to, so you feel in the back of your mind that what you're doing is never enough. Full time work, full time family, growing family, a lack of laborers can be discouraging, difficult at times. People are asking you, why aren't we out doing this? Why aren't we out doing that? And you're thinking, I'm trying to make my lunch tonight for the workday tomorrow.

Or, I'm burned out because of work today. So, unrealistic expectations on the parts of yourself or coming from others as well can be very difficult as well. For me, hearing of great movements in the world and then looking at this meager, small work taking place, could be kind of discouraging at times as well. Reading church history at times for me was discouraging. There's so many. At the same time, and I started out this way, I didn't want to be one of those self-appointed people, right, that's just: I've got a gift. People are going to have to deal with it. And I'm just going to be the pastor here. But I think over time, people know. People know if you're called. And that's one of the ways I think God validates those who are called is by His church. And so that's been helpful in times of discouragement, is the church in love calling you "pastor," or calling you "our shepherd," or calling you "our leader," in times where you feel completely unworthy to serve them, you know.

James: In these first couple of years, was there still an ongoing uncertainty of: Am I in God's will? Or, what happened where you had more confidence that you knew: I'm in the Lord's will.

Justin: I think still questioning my own calling. I didn't go to seminary. I didn't have a formal theological education. I'm doing what I can with Sermon Audio and Monergism audio and all that to learn and to grow. And so, I think the first few years, there was a lot of discouragement just because, again, I was questioning: we didn't get started the typical way another church plant gets started. So, is God in this? Am I called to do this? There was just a lot of uncertainty with my own calling. And it wasn't until, one, I read Spurgeon's call to the ministry in his lectures to his students - you know, one of the things he says is if you can be satisfied doing something else, he says, go do it. And for me, there was just an unsettling matter in my heart that I must do this. I can't imagine myself doing anything else. Like Jeremiah says, there's a fire burning up in my bones, and if I don't do it, I'm going to burn up type of a thing. So I think a few years into the work, when I began to see people falling in love with the Scriptures and in love with God, and just hating sin and fighting sin and finding joy in God - when you see a little bit of the fruits that God allows you to see of your ministry, there's a lot of confirmation that God's in it. I remember a quote that I'll always cling to from H.B. Charles, Jr., who said to pastors, he says, "Brothers, the harvest is not at the end of your sermon. It's at the end of the age." And so as most preachers know, Sunday's can be the most discouraging day of the week because you feel like crawling under a rock after that. But, in the midst of the work of church planting - and I don't even like to call it church planting, because you're seeking to fulfill the Great Commission, and I think the only way to do that is within the local church where there is evangelism, where there is the making of disciples but also the maturing of disciples, and the multiplying of disciples. And so when you see a little bit of fruit of

the labor and the joy and the peace of God behind it all, there's a great assurance behind it. And I think that's when I reached out to you and told you that we're even more convinced that this is exactly what we're called to do. Because of that - seeing God in it.

James: A question that often comes up from people is if they should move to be a part of a church. What thoughts, cautions, or encouragements would you give to a person in a similar situation?

Justin: I would say based on my own experience in the matter, wanting to move because of the fact that we didn't have a local church that we were a part of, is beware of false romantic views of a church. It's easy to see only what YouTube is posting up about this church. It's easy to see only what you're hearing in the sermon regarding a church. You're not seeing the full life of a church in just turning on a sermon on Sermon Audio or whatever the media might be. So I think it's easy for people to have a romantic view of a particular church. And I know that only because we get visitors sometimes and they say, "You're Justin Trevino." And I'm thinking, yeah, but... And I can see there's a sense of expectation there that has been kindled on YouTube over a long period of time or Sermon Audio for a long period of time. And before long, they just view you as brother. They see you as brother. And I think there can be a lot of false, romantic views over the Internet, right?

And it could be that the Lord wants to do something in your own town, in your own city, wherever you're from. And moving isn't always the solution. It could be that you're sensing a need, but you're seeing the solution in moving, and the solution isn't necessarily in moving, it's in seeking the Lord and waiting and saying, Lord, what might You want to do here where I'm at? Again, because I was burned out at the time, just needing to be taught, needing a biblical local church, we were just like we've gotta get out of this city and move on to something else. But because I had the friendship, the encouragement from Tim, I thought, well, I'm going to fall back on that as I get my heart right, as I get my family right and move on with things. I would say the main thing is people can easily over the Internet have a false view of a church; an unrealistic view of a church, where everything's romantic, everything's perfect, and you're only hearing the mouthpiece in a certain church. You're not seeing the arms. You're not seeing the feet. You're not seeing the body. You're only hearing the mouth. And that can be very, very deceiving at times. I would say the biggest lesson while working a full time job and seeking to plant a church is that little is a lot when God's truly in it. The few loaves and fish that you have to bring before God that you think is nothing is what often leaves people in the congregation shaking your hand afterwards when you feel like you've completely failed in preaching. And it's always those sermons where you've

had little sleep, you've had little preparation time, you've had a lot of exhaustion over the week, and people are thanking you that God really spoke to them and that they were helped. And you're thinking, that's only the Lord because I've had nothing to offer in my mind, right? But I'd say that's one of the biggest lessons is that God is often pleased to use what little we have to offer if it's offered in faith, and it's offered in childlike dependence upon Him. God is often pleased to use that to bless His people.