

## Rising Above The Preference Driven Church by Ricky Jenkins

If you were to construct your image of the perfect church, what would it look like?

We live in an age where preference rules. Today's culture values personal choice so highly, it prevents many from committing to real priorities. Fifth marriages, live-in lovers, quick flings often characterize our restless society while commitment is at an all-time low. Sadly, many Christians allow **this** culture of personal preference to influence their idea of a perfect church. As a result, many treat their church like a beloved spouse during the honeymoon stage, but when the romance wears off they trade up for something new, driven by preferences rather than priorities. Should personal preference be the deciding factor in committing to a local church?

The problem with preference is, I look for what satisfies me! Single adults have a slew of preferences for an ideal mate – personality, beauty, love, laughter, wealth. We may have similar expectations for a church – contemporary music or traditional hymns, youth activities, personable preachers or a fancy facility. The reality is **that** if we focus on **our own** preferences, we'll never be content or committed to our local church.

The solution to a preference-driven church mentality is not to compare a new “**what pleases me**” for our **picture of a healthy church**. When we do this we are able to focus on our church's actual central strengths rather than its weaknesses. We will be able to determine if our church might be falling short. We will be able to establish reliable and objective criteria for finding a healthy church. The important priorities for a healthy church are God's priorities.

**First is worship**, which involves shifting our entire focus from ourselves to God, giving Him the glory He alone deserves (Rev. 4:11; 7:12). The very first church in Jerusalem modeled this brilliantly. They continually devoted themselves to teaching and prayer (Acts 2:41), praised God with gladness and sincerity of heart (vs. 46), and responded to God's works with awe (vs. 42). Our worship is not “me-centered” but God-centered. *(I note that although they were a large church family that the activities of the church here and following were not directed to please anyone except God, mac)*

**Second is instruction**, which is rightly teaching the whole Word of God as the final authority in matters of faith and practice. The first church was devoted to the apostles' teaching. The apostles then instructed the next generation “to give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). For a healthy church, instruction in God's word is a non-negotiable priority.

**Third is fellowship**, which consists of close, spiritual relationships with fellow believers in the local church. Again, the early church gathered for instruction and worship, expressing deep love and care by meeting each other's needs (Acts 2:42-45; 4:31-37). The Hebrew writer said, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together....but encouraging one another.” (Heb. 10:24-25). To grow in Christ we need each other. We grow together. For a healthy church, Christ-centered fellowship in the unity of the Spirit is a top priority for each Christian's growth.

**Fourth, and finally, evangelism**, which is sharing the good news of Jesus' death for our sins and that He

arose from the dead for others. The first church made spreading the good news a priority (Acts 2:40-41), preaching the free gift of eternal life to others. We cannot wait around for others to come to us, it is our priority for us to seek opportunities to teach others.

Are you struggling with your local church commitment and tossing around the idea of looking for something that better fits your preferences? Look at our model in Jerusalem. Then look at the strengths, not the weakness of the local church that follows God's priorities. These four priorities of a healthy church will give each one a place to start as each sets his or her sights on a local church that seeks to please God rather than men.

I have to keep asking myself if I'm staying flexible. I also remind myself that God is a God of freshness and change. God himself never changes, nor his Son. His Word is immutable. He remains the same "yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).

God's work, however, is innovative and creative. His working changes even though he stays consistent. The Bible describes his ways as "higher" (Isa 55:8-9) and his mercies as "new" every morning (Lam 3:22-23). Now that's creative!

God is faithful, but he's always changing things up for us—making things new. God flexes his design processes and alters his methods so that we can experience him in new ways. It's a course of action he implements to keep our relationship with him growing.

Scripture commands us to be "imitators" of God—to "mimic" him. So one of the ways we can do that is to keep asking ourselves the change questions on a regular basis: *Am I currently open to change? Am I willing to risk? Am I flexible enough to innovate? Am I willing to endure the possibility of making a massive change in the direction God is leading? Will this change draw me closer to God?*