

The Sin of Preference

Choices are made based on preference. We eat at certain restaurants because we prefer their style & quality of food. We choose a college because we prefer its program & reputation. We choose a church, in part, because we prefer its worship style and preacher. Paul warns us of certain dangers associated with this choice in today's Templates of Truth.

Paul started the church at Corinth and was there for about 18 months. After Paul left, Apollos followed him as pastor. Scripture reveals that Peter also held some tenure there and taught the people. A major problem developed within the Corinthian church related to these leaders. The members began to divide themselves into alliance groups. Paul described it in terms of divisions and quarrels – *each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of (Peter)...”* (I Corinthians 1:12). Paul admonished these believers – *that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one (of us) against the other* (I Corinthians 4:6). The Corinthian believers were elevating one spiritual leader as being superior to others in various ways. Accordingly, they would take up the cause of their man and promote an agenda to esteem him up above all others. This issue was among those that defiled & disgraced the Christians and their church at Corinth.

Unfortunately, not much has changed in this regard over the past 1,955 years. If anything, it has gotten worse! Church fellowship is still divided through pride and jealousy over leadership styles and personalities. People develop a great love and admiration for their pastor and rightly so. When God calls him to a different church, however, they feel abandoned as if no other could ever fill his shoes. Many of these reject the pastor that follows him because in their eyes, he can never measure up to his predecessor. Many will leave the church in search of another that has a pulpiteer as good and eloquent as the former pastor they so exclusively admired. “Church hopping” becomes their routine because no man, no matter how gifted and sincere, can ever meet their expectations. This shallow level of spiritual maturity and faithfulness cause some of these to drop out of church altogether in disappointment and disillusion.

Multi-staff church situations pose a challenge as well. Particularly when various staff ministers share the preaching responsibilities, some church members develop their preferences for one over others. Their man speaks better, is more interesting & challenging and when one of the others preach the conclusion is often, “we just don't feel like we are being fed.” Soon, attendance becomes a “pick and choose” routine based on who is listed in the bulletin as preaching. Sunday School classes often become big or small based on who the teacher is and how gifted he or she is in teaching skills & abilities. Some people admire their teacher more than their pastor and substitute Sunday School for corporate worship.

Modern technology and the mega-church trend have not helped the situation. We now have high-profile preachers who are famous authors of books, run daily radio & television broadcasts, and who pastor large congregations in urban America. People flock to their churches because of

the national & international popularity of these men, some of whom have a presentation that is unmatched in theology & delivery. Even though not necessarily intentional, their churches become built around these men. The church is what it is because of the personality in the pulpit. Many people would not even be a member of that church if the celebrity pastor was not there. Some even reject attendance in public corporate worship altogether in favor of hearing their man on television week after week. His books replace their Bible as a major reading resource. Their money supports his world-wide ministry efforts rather than their local church.

If the Apostle Paul were on a missionary journey in America today, many churches and believers would not be too happy to hear what he might have to say about these situations. As he did with the Corinthians, he would remind us that these men are but mere servants doing the work God called & gifted them to do, but it is God who gives the substance. He would remind us that our eyes should never be on a man, no matter how eloquent, popular and legitimate he might be, but that our focus should always be on God and His Word. He would tell us unequivocally that when we become so transfixed on a preacher or teacher, it is a manifestation of our carnality, spiritual immaturity and an unholy alliance. When our focus is on God and His Word, any servant of His can become His faithful instrument through which to challenge and exhort us in Christian living.

Do you have a favorite preacher or teacher? That's OK, unless you would go to another Sunday School class if he or she were to quit teaching; or unless you would find another church if the pastor were to resign. Admiring the man in the pulpit is OK, unless you are bored with others when your man is not on the schedule. Paul would tell us to grow up and prefer God in the man; not the man of God.

That's today's Templates of Truth. This is your Bible teacher, Rick Smith, reminding you to attend church this Sunday for Bible study and worship, pray for one another, and always strive to abide in Christ. Until next time, have a blessed and glorious day in the Lord Jesus.