

**“ARE CHURCHES IN COMPETITION WITH EACH OTHER?”****1 Corinthians 3, et. al.****THEME: The issues of loyalty and church hopping****DATE: 03/04/07**

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According to the Barna Group, each year one out of every seven adults changes churches for any of a variety of reasons.

Some people move to a different city and shop for a new church. Others decide a different church may be more to their liking, so they church-hop. Bouncing from church to church is a way of life for many Americans who enjoy the variety of experiences in different churches.

Because of this heavy traffic between churches, some people wonder if the churches themselves are competing to become the largest or most popular congregation in the community. .

Churches are finding that the way to attract new people is to appeal to their changing interests and needs. Many such churches are unequivocally committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are willing to adapt their methods to reach people, but they don't compromise the gospel of Christ. Churches like that are attractive because they are alive. People are excited about new life in Christ.

- Church shopping is a reality in today's religious culture. Whether we like it or not, we have to deal with it.

I want to offer a few **considerations** that may help us deal with this tough question of church-hopping.

**I. THE INFLUENCE OF CONSUMERISM**

Americans are accustomed to lots of choices. If you shop around you'll find something to satisfy your tastes, preferences, and budget.

A hundred years ago people depended on ice boxes to preserve their food. Suppose they were asked how their needs could be better met, how do you think they would have answered? They would have asked for cheaper ice and more frequent deliveries. No one would have asked for a side-by-side refrigerator-freezer with a water and ice dispenser in the door.

Consumers know what they want when they see it. People see variety and options to suit their tastes in practically every aspect of life.

- The same kind of thing has happened in churches. Even fifty years ago there were relatively few options beyond denominational choices. But that's all changed.

According to American Demographics magazine, "Religion and spirituality have become just another product in the broader marketplace of goods and services."

During a moment of silence in the service a small voice was heard throughout the sanctuary, "Mommy, can we go back to the other church now?"

Amanda Phifer writes, "Adults will flit from one church to another they way they hunt for Christmas bargains:

Which church has the best child care? Which church has my favorite style of music? Which church has the strongest recreation program? Which church is the friendliest?" (*Church Hopping*, Faithworks.com)

If one church doesn't satisfy, there's sure to be another one nearby that is eager to accommodate a new "customer."

According to one observer, "Changing churches is not much different than changing brands of cereal." (Chris Schlect, *Church Hopping*. "Credenda/Agenda" 5.6)

If conflict rears its ugly head in a church some people slip away to connect with another church where people are happier.

- Shopping around to gratify your tastes and preferences is expected in the marketplace, but is it appropriate in the church?

In the Old Testament we read about the Lord getting angry when the Israelites wailed for meat and bemoaned the fact that they had left Egypt where the food was more to their liking than the constant diet of manna. So the Lord became gave them what they craved—meat in the form of millions of quail for a whole month. Then a severe plague struck the Israelites, and they buried the people who had craved other food in a place called "graves of craving." (Numbers 11)

There is a timeless lesson for us all in that. When God's people follow him obediently, he meets their needs, but he doesn't satisfy all their tastes.

- What are we, as a church, supposed to learn from this?

Church is not about getting what we like. It’s all about knowing and loving and obeying and worshipping the Lord God.

There is a grave danger in allowing those who know the least about what the church is supposed to be to have the greatest influence on what the church is about. That’s what happens if we cater only to tastes.

We must know the difference between adapting our methods to engage the culture and changing our message to accommodate the culture.

The consumer culture is strong enough to cause a church to lose its proper focus.

[2<sup>nd</sup> consideration]

## **II. THE PASSAGE OF HISTORY**

In the first century no one thought of the church as a building. The church was a community of Christ’s followers. They met in public places and in homes.

The idea of multiple churches in a city with different worship styles to suit different tastes hadn’t even been imagined yet.

For most of the past two thousand years people remained loyal to their church, mostly because there was no alternative.

Church dynamics expert Lyle Schaller says, “The loyal member born before 1940 is upset and baffled when a longtime member becomes dissatisfied and quietly departs to worship with a different congregation in that same community. The younger member, who was reared in a culture overflowing with choices, shrugs off that departure as normal and completely acceptable.” (Quoted by Phifer in *Church hopping*)

The concept of commuting to a distant church was totally foreign to earlier generations. Today people are willing to travel up to an hour to attend their mega-church.

Mega-churches also set a standard of excellence that smaller churches can’t match. The state-of-the-art audio-visual technology, and the programming targeted to the precise interests and needs of individuals are so appealing that people are willing to say goodbye to their home churches.

- But loyalty is not entirely lost upon today’s generations. The “post-modern” or “emergent” generations are loyal to a church where believers are authentic in their faith and practice; where Christianity is an adventure, and a way of life seven days a week.

We must admit the truth that a lot of Christians are shriveling spiritually in a church that won’t adapt its ministries to reach a new generation. Many of these people move to a new church and they come alive spiritually.

The so-called emerging generation today doesn’t think it makes much difference what church people choose, as long as they are sincere about following Jesus Christ.

- Times are different. Changing churches is considered quite appropriate for sincere Christians who are serious about their faith.

[3<sup>rd</sup> consideration]

## **III. THE TIMELESSNESS OF TRUTH**

In the Bible the Church is the flock of which Christ is the Chief Shepherd.

The practice of bouncing from church to church according to one’s fancy contradicts some essential aspects of the Christian faith.

Our Lord has placed shepherds and overseers in the church to nurture, protect, and guide his flock.

The Apostle Peter instructed the overseers: *‘To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.’* (1 Peter 5:1-3)

Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews says, *‘Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.’* (Hebrews 13:17)

It’s practically impossible for God’s shepherds to watch over his flock if they wander from fold to fold. Some of them get hurt or lost and they have no shepherd to help them.

- No church is perfect. Every church has lots of faults and flaws.

The style of music on a particular Sunday may not be exactly the sort each worshiper appreciates.

The apostles repeatedly urged the believers in the various churches to be patient with each other.

Paul wrote, ‘As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.’ (Ephesians 4:1-3)

There is no biblical permission to slip away because something is not to a one’s liking or one isn’t willing to submit to the spiritual oversight of the overseers and pastors.

Belonging to a church is about the care of people’s souls, not the satisfying of people’s preferences.

- Caring for God’s people means working hard to make the timeless truths of God’s word practical and relevant to each new generation.

[4<sup>th</sup> consideration]

#### **IV. THE LEGITIMACY OF LEAVING**

Why would anybody remain loyal to a church that is spiritually lifeless, where there is no evidence of Christ-like love for one another?

I understand why sincere believers move to a different fellowship where they can find what God’s word says they should expect in a church.

Jesus told his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

If we are serious about fulfilling our mission of bringing people to faith in Christ, we must provide the loving environment where our people feel it’s safe to bring their un-churched family, friends and neighbors.

- There are many legitimate reasons for leaving a church, like serious doctrinal error, of course. What about a family that leaves its church because their teenage children need fellowship in a strong Bible-based youth ministry, which their small church does not have? I suppose the same would apply to a young family with small children. The old practice of expecting little children to sit still in big church, or to sleep on mother’s lap or to keep occupied with a coloring book during the service doesn’t cut it any more. If a church offers nothing for their little ones, families will find a church that does.

I can accept the legitimacy of leaving a church that’s all talk and no action. It’s not enough just to hold to right doctrine.

In the recent issue of *Christianity Today* Scot McKnight writes, ‘. . . every judgment scene in the Bible is portrayed as a judgment based on works; no judgment scene looks like a theological articulation test.’ (*Five Streams of the Emerging Church*, CT February, 2007) Christ does not hold us accountable just to articulate our theology accurately.

It doesn’t make any sense to stay in a church that is doctrinally pure, but never practices what it preaches.

- There are some legitimate reasons for moving to a different church.

[5<sup>th</sup> consideration]

#### **V. THE GOAL OF MATURITY**

A healthy church is a community of people whose lives have been transformed by the power of the gospel of Christ, and who are growing in their faith and passing along the good news of Christ to others.

A church is a fellowship where Christians become more like their Lord Jesus Christ. There’s a term for this: “spiritual formation.” This was the Apostle Paul’s longing for the Galatian Christians. He wrote: ‘My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you’ (Galatians 4:19)

Spiritual formation means growing spiritually to become a mature Christian, instead of remaining a perpetual infant.

The Apostle Paul said the responsibility of spiritual leaders in the church is ‘to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming’. (Ephesians 4:12-14)

- There will be spiritual infants in any healthy church. But in a healthy church they don’t remain infants. The goal is healthy growth toward spiritual maturity.

The Apostle Paul made this clear: ‘Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. (1 Corinthians 3:1-2)

The Christians in the church in Corinth considered themselves spiritual, but many of them had never matured to where they could digest solid spiritual food.

The Corinthian church was hooked on sensationalism. They wanted their church meetings to massage their psyches.

- It's not much different today. There are churches that focus on exciting experiences or on human wisdom, like the stuff Dr. Phil or Oprah serve up. Or they draw heavily on the success strategies of the latest gurus in the business arena.

It's easy to develop a taste for smooth teaching that goes down easy.

That's called "The Sweet Jesus Syndrome." It's a high calorie spiritual addiction. People need a regular fix. And if they don't get it at one church they leave, saying that they're not getting fed.

If that's what Christians want most, they won't grow spiritually.

- What does a solid spiritual diet comprise? It holds some exciting theological insights that caused Paul himself to exclaim "Wow!" (Romans 11:33-36). But there are also heavy, sobering truths, like the teaching about Christ's atoning death on the cross.

Paul even has the nerve to suggest that some who think they are Christians are just deceiving themselves, and they ought to examine themselves to see if they are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5)

- Many Christians grow no further than a spiritual milk diet. They only want God to help them feel better about life right now.

But mature Christians care most about becoming what God wants them to be.

You can come up with the most exciting vision of what the church plans to do in the future with its programs and facilities. But it's just a waste of time if you neglect the growth of Christians from spiritual infancy to maturity.

- Christians who are still spiritual infants tend to follow their favorite preacher, instead of being followers of Christ.

Paul writes: *'You are still worldly (lit. fleshly). For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.'* (1 Corinthians 3:3-5)

There were conflicts in the church at Corinth.

They formed cliques of allegiance to Paul or Apollos.

Paul wrote, "We're nothing, except servants of Christ."

I can imagine Paul becoming animated in his appeal, "You don't put your faith in the preachers! You believe in Christ!"

He explained, "Apollos and I were just doing our job as servants of Christ. We're not trying to gain a following for ourselves. All we have done is to help you to follow Christ."

- This must be the goal in a healthy church: bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ, and nurturing them from spiritual infancy to maturity. And you have to know what spiritual maturity looks like.

If a church says this is its mission, and it actually does it, it's worth plugging your spiritual life into such a church.

My prayer for First Free Church is that we will be a community in which Christians mature, where no one can comfortably stay a spiritual infant. There ought to be lots of baby Christians here all the time—people who have just come into a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ, and who are already growing as they move from milk to solid spiritual food that develops Christ-like character in them.

Why would we settle for anything less?

Every Christian should know what it means to mature, so that no one can think he is a mature believer while he behaves like a spiritual infant.

Our priority is to see Christ being formed in us—spiritual formation.