

Programs (Spectator Church) vs Prevenience (Participatory Church) :

How to Prepare for Simple Church - John White - 2005

Years of sitting in traditional church has not prepared us to do church in the manner described in the New Testament. We have been taught to come. To sit. To watch and listen to what others have prepared. (Someone described it as "sit, soak and sour".) This is **Spectator Church**. And it is no way to train believers to be priests!

By contrast, the churches described in the Bible engaged in **Participatory Church**. This kind of church requires preparation on the part of **all of it's members**. This is new. We haven't been taught how to do this.

Therefore, some **retraining** is in order. One of the best passages to help us do this is Heb. 10:24-25. As you consider the instruction in v. 24, note that it is given in the context of the church "meeting together" in v. 25.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."(NIV)

Here are a few notes to help understand the passage:

1. "Let us..." Note what this doesn't say. It doesn't say "Let the pastor consider..." or "Let the house church leader consider..." The key word is "us". Every member of the church. The priesthood of all believers. The mark of a mature church is that every member understands and fulfills their role in "preparing for church". No spectators in New Testament church!
2. "Let us consider...": from *katanoeo*. *noeo* = to think + *kata* = an intensifier. To think deeply about, consider, contemplate, observe. Jesus uses the same word when he says, "Consider the ravens...consider the lilies." (Lk. 12:24-27) This is work that we must do ahead of time. This is where listening prayer (2 way) comes in. We consider God's prevenience. What is He initiating in the lives of the other people in my spiritual family?
3. NIV says "Let us consider how ...". The Greek really says "Let us consider one another..." We are to be observing and thinking deeply about the others in our simple church in order to be able to effectively "stir them up to love and good works". (Hard to do this if we only see them once a week.) Each one is unique. What works for one may not work for another. I must "think deeply" about each one. (Difficult to do this in a church of 100 or 1000.) How is God already at work in their lives? How am I to join Him in what He is doing?
4. "Let us consider one another to spur (them) on." "Spur on" comes from a root word that means "to make sharp" as with a sword. (Prov. 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.") It means "to stir up, incite, provoke, motivate". (Note: What motivates one will not motivate another. Every parent and every coach know this.) This is the focus and goal of the New Testament church meeting - every member involved in lovingly and effectively motivating the others. Teaching the Word, singing, prophesying, etc. are not the goal of our meeting together, they are the means to the goal. (This helps us understand 1 Cor. 14:26 - "Let everything be done for the strengthening (edification) of the church.")

5. "Let us consider one another to spur (them) on to love and good deeds." How do we know if our meeting has accomplished what God wanted? -We know if people leave being motivated and spurred on to love (God and others) and to express that love in good works throughout the week. (Note: This is not a guilt motivation resulting from "should's and ought's". Rather, it is a heart motivation that comes from a genuine desire that God stirs up on the inside. We can't make this happen. We can only see what God is doing and join Him in that.)

Church prepares us for the rest of the week (24/7). And the rest of the week (24/7) is where we (all of us!) prepare for church.

What does a house church actually "do" when it meets?

Some have answered this question by going back to the program of the traditional/institutional church. There is an "Order of Service". Greeting...opening prayer...time of singing...perhaps some personal sharing...the sermon...closing prayer...etc. Isn't that what you are supposed to "do" when you have church? Week after week. Always the same program.

With this model, house church simply becomes a mini version of what goes on in church buildings on Sunday mornings all over the country. In contrast to the "program model" of church, I want to suggest the "prevenience model". The word "prevenience" (rhymes with "convenience") refers to "that which goes before or precedes". The word describes an important aspect of God's character. He is prevenient. That is, **He is always at work before we come onto the scene. He is always initiating. In our lives and in the church.**

"Prevenience" is most commonly used in reference to grace. Prevenient grace. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8) Before we ever thought about God, while we were still lost in our sin, He took the initiative and gave His life for us. Before we ever moved toward God, He moved toward us. He is always initiating. He is always starting things. He is prevenient.

Our part? To see what He is doing and to respond. He is the initiator. We are the responders. How we "do church" must be based on the character of our God. So, what are the implications for ministry in general and house church meetings in particular?

The "prevenience model" for church is illustrated in the Old Testament.

"Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. At the Lord's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped...Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in the camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. (Numbers 9:17,18,22)

The cloud = the physical manifestation of the presence of God (see Mt. 17:5)

The Tent = the Tent of Meeting. The place where the people assembled to meet God. (Consider

1 Cor. 14:26: "When you come together..." or "When you assemble...")

God (represented by the cloud here) is always the Prime Mover. He is always the Initiator. He is always proactive. He is always prevenient. He is always "before".

The people of God are always the responders. Their job description is simple: "WATCH THE CLOUD. If it moves, then you move. If it doesn't move, then you don't move. No matter how long it takes - two

days, a month or a year." For some of us, **learning how not to move is much harder than learning how to move.**

Sounds un-American, doesn't it? Our culture says, "Be proactive! Don't just sit there - do something! Make it happen!" And that culture is reflected in the church.

The values of the Bible are different. **"WATCH THE CLOUD. Do what it does."** God is God and we are not. It's His church, not ours (Mt. 16:18). He is building it and we are not (although He does let us help out some times).

The church that God is restoring is more than a church that meets in the home. It's a church made up of people who are getting really good at WATCHING THE CLOUD. And responding appropriately. Think about the cloud this week.

The concept of "prevenience" was at the foundation of Jesus' ministry.
("Prevenience": referring to that which goes before or precedes)

He said, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." (Jn. 5:19)"... I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." (Jn. 8:28) "For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it." (Jn. 12:49)

Jesus, the very Son of God, did nothing (zero/nada) on his own initiative. He spoke nothing on His own initiative. **The Father initiated, Jesus responded.** Jesus believed that His Father was prevenient. Every healing, every miracle, every teaching was initiated by the Father and carried out by Jesus.

His entire plan consisted of this:

See what the Father is doing and do that.
Hear what the Father is saying and say that.
Nothing more. Nothing less.

The "**program model**" assumes that the Prevenient Creator (who never made two snowflakes alike) will always follow the same format when His children come together. This model requires that we do the planning. We develop the agenda. Then, we ask God to bless it. This model results in church that is usually orderly (by our definition) but also often sterile.

The "**prevenience model**" assumes only that the Prevenient Creator is already at work before His children gather for church. This model requires that we see/hear what the Father is doing/saying and then ask Him how we are to respond. We surrender our agenda and look for His. This model results in church that is sometimes messy (by our definition) but also often exhilaratingly alive and fruitful.

Returning to the New Testament model of church does not just mean "doing church" in a house. It also means returning to the reality of Jesus being both present and prevenient. He is no longer the passive "honored guest" for whom we perform. He is "the Master of ceremonies". He runs the show. He sets the agenda.

And, that changes everything.

Dear Church, I first learned the word "prevenience" from Eugene Peterson in his book: 'The Contemplative Pastor' (p. 65f). I was struck by what he had to say because it was immediately obvious to me that he was right. However, it was exactly the opposite of what I had been taught. I knew how to be proactive. I knew how to "run the church" and get things done. I knew how to "make it happen". I had a lot of unlearning to do (I'm a recovering control addict).

Here's what Peterson has to say (with a few of my comments in italics): "In running the church (or the house church), I seize the initiative. I take charge. I take responsibility for motivation and recruitment, for showing the way, for getting things started. If I don't, things drift. I am aware of the tendency to apathy, the human susceptibility to indolence, and I use my leadership to counter it. (Isn't that what we have been taught that leadership is? If it isn't this, what is it?)

By contrast, the cure of souls (he means here the true work of a pastor or leader of a church as an organism) is **a cultivated awareness that God has already seized the initiative**. The traditional doctrine defining this truth is prevenience: God everywhere and always seizing the initiative. He gets thing going. He had and continues to have the first word. Prevenience is the conviction that **God has been working diligently, redemptively, and strategically before I appeared on the scene, before I was aware there was something here for me to do....**there is a disciplined, determined conviction that everything (and I mean, precisely everything) we do is a response to God's first work, his initiating act. We learn to **be attentive to the divine action already in process** so that the previously unheard word of God is heard, the previously unattended act of God is noticed?

(The questions we should be asking are: ...)

What has God been doing here?

What traces of grace can I discern in this life?

What history of love can I read in this group?

What has God set in motion that I can get in on?"

I call these "the prevenience questions". Learning to ask/answer these questions is the starting place for the church each time she meets. This is the "prevenience model" of church. With apologies to Steven Covey, we Christians were never called to be "proactive". **We are called to be "reactive" to God. (Or, perhaps "responsive" to God is better.)**