

"THE GOOD WIFE"

(Acts 2:42-47)

(Chuck Swindoll)

As Christians, we have a commitment to one another, regardless of our positions, our levels of maturity, or how long we've been believers. We are mutually bound by a duty to help one another grow toward greater maturity. The church—not the building, but the community—is how we accomplish that. Every congregation must commit to godly priorities that further this purpose, just like the first body of Christ's followers. Above, we saw how Luke described the early church's priorities (2:42-47).

The church is called the "bride" of Christ (Rev. 19:7; cf Eph. 5:32), and if you'll allow me some leeway, I'd like to present the church's four essential responsibilities using the acronym "WIFE"—Worship, Instruction, Fellowship, Expression.

Worship

The first-century followers of Christ continued to meet in the temple, not only because it provided a large venue for their growing numbers, but because it seemed like a natural meeting place. As good Jews, they continued to participate in temple worship. They also met in homes, where they sang together and observed communion.

The purpose of salvation is to bring into God's presence a body of worshipers. In Ephesians, Paul says God foreordained us "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:6). In Philippians, he says that Jesus came to earth and suffered as He did and was raised "so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2: 10-11). We were created for worship, we were redeemed for worship, and we will enjoy worship for eternity. Therefore, a church must make worship a priority.

Instruction

The first Christians couldn't get enough teaching. As we'll discover later in Acts, they met in the temple for instruction. They also met in homes where teaching took place. They wanted to know everything that Jesus had taught the apostles. They remained hungry for spiritual nourishment.

Paul says transformation begins with the mind (Rom. 12:2). Although we mustn't mistake biblical and theological knowledge for maturity, growth cannot occur without it. Instruction gives the mind the building material with which the Holy Spirit renovates the old person into a new, Christlike person. If new Christians are like hungry babies needing nourishment, then a church must provide quality biblical and theological teaching, or it will forever remain a nursery.



Fellowship

I examined the four priorities in Acts 2:42-47 as individual elements, but in the early church they were interconnected. The people gathered for worship. Instruction was part of their love feasts. Baptism gave them a sense of identity with one another. They prayed individually and communally. Sharing the bread and cup of communion reminded them of their interconnectedness, and that prompted them to be extraordinarily generous with one another. Like coals in a fire, people grow cold and die when separated; however, they produce light and warmth when connected, sharing joyfully and generously with each other.

Expression

Acts 2:42 specifically lists prayer as the driving force behind everything the church does: satisfying worship, nourishing instruction, life-sustaining fellowship, meaningful outreach, and effective evangelism. That's why Luke amplifies the idea of prayer in the phrase "praising God and having favor with all the people." The result? "The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (2:47).

Churches can become overly inward focused, adopting an "us four and no more" mentality. Worship, instruction, and fellowship serve the needs of the body, while visitors feel like outsiders looking in. Meanwhile, no one gives any thought to impacting the culture and community beyond the church property line. Expression in the biblical sense cannot be contained; it naturally affects everyone the members encounter, wherever they may be.

Churches can also become overly outward focused, so that every function of the church becomes evangelistic. While evangelism is an essential function of the church, it must not come at the expense of other priorities: worship, instruction, and fellowship. If all four priorities are upheld with prayer and maintained in balance, evangelism naturally occurs. People don't have to be cajoled or coerced to tell others about Christ; their spiritual growth will become an easy topic of most conversations. As the first Christians devoted themselves to worship, instruction, fellowship, and prayer, they became bold witnesses of the gospel to the world outside. As Millard Erickson states,

In biblical times the church gathered for worship and instruction. Then they went out to evangelize. In worship, the members of the church focus upon God; in instruction and fellowship, they focus upon themselves and fellow Christians; in evangelism, they turn their attention to non-Christians. It is well for the church to keep some separation between these several activities. If this is not done, one or more may be crowded out. . . . For example, worship of God will suffer if the gathering of the body becomes oriented primarily to the interaction among Christians, or if the service is aimed exclusively at evangelizing the unbelievers who happen to be present. This was not the pattern of the church in the Book of Acts. Rather, believers gathered to praise God and be edified; then they went forth to reach the lost in the world without.

Is your church a healthy bride of Christ?