

# Five Priorities of the Church

**H**ow are you doing? Did you enjoy your activities on Saturday? Did you get enough sleep Saturday night, and were you wide awake Sunday morning? Did your church building seem nice and neat? Do you wish that something was different about your church?

On Sunday morning when you went to church did someone welcome you? Was the church sanctuary too cold or too warm? Did you like the manner in which the sanctuary was decorated? Did you feel comfortable in your chair or pew?

And how was the church bulletin? Did you think it was nice, clear, and straightforward? Or, was it too complicated? Or, was it too staid and boring? Were the colors okay? Was there too much information or not enough?

And what about the people sitting around you? Did you wish there were more people or fewer people? Were they the type of people with whom you like to attend church? Were they the right age? Were they the right race? Were they the right social class? Were they friendly, or do you wish they had just left you alone? You know, were they just like you?

And what about the worship service? Were you encouraged with the reading of scripture and was it God honoring? Were the words of the songs on the screen too difficult to read? Was the music too loud or too soft? Was someone singing too loudly or not at all? If they did not sing, did that motivate you to not sing? Were the prayers encouraging and uplifting?

Now let's ask the important question. What were you doing there? Why did you go to church? Did you go for the

scripture reading, the music, maybe a video, or the offering? Were they simply the preliminaries for what you really wanted – the sermon? Was the sermon the important part of the service and the other things just had to be tolerated? Were you sorry that the sermon wasn't shorter or longer? Did you wish that the sermon was on a different topic that morning?

Was the style of the music what is most important to you in selecting and attending a church? I cannot tell you how often I have been asked if our church's music is contemporary. I am rarely asked about the preaching style. So let

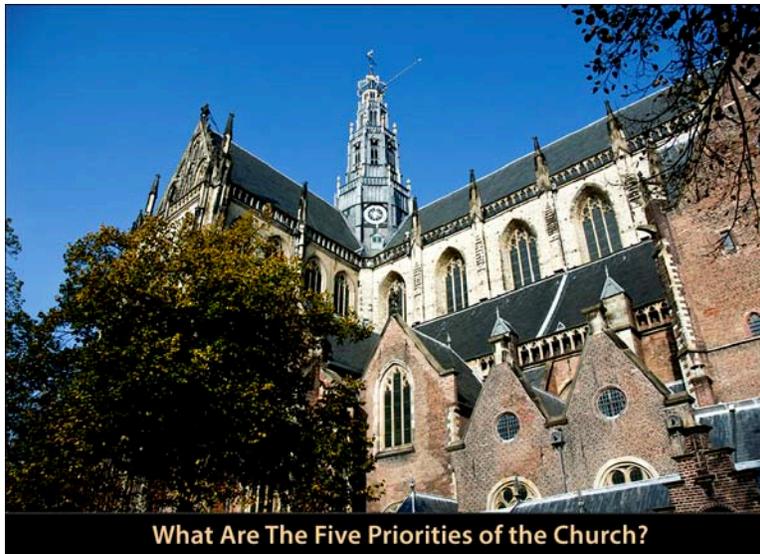
me ask about the preaching. Was the preaching topical or book-by-book, chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse? What is important in a church?

How did you respond to those questions? What did you not like about the church and what did you like? Some people are critical of churches for many different reasons. The question I want to explore is this, "What are

the priorities of the church?" What is important in a church? There are many opinions. The answer is not found in our preferences – our likes or dislikes. The answer is found in the Bible. What does it say? What does God say? God has given us the answer in the five priorities of the early church. We will discover them in Acts 2:42. Acts 2:42 reads as follows,

**They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**

**Acts 2:42 (NASB)**



This important sentence reveals five priorities of the early believers in Jesus Christ. We are told that they were given to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. Now someone will say that is only four. Where is the fifth priority? The fifth priority is that they had godly leaders called apostles.

**PRIORITY ONE - GODLY ELDERS.** The early church was started by godly men called apostles. They were men who were taught by, disciplined by and cared for by Jesus. Jesus was their example. Today, we do not have apostles because the apostle Peter makes it clear in Acts 1:21-22 that an apostle must have been a witness of Jesus' ministry. Today, we have leaders who are called elders. They are to be males who meet the biblical criteria given in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These criteria are often called qualifications, but a careful examination of these criteria will reveal that they are actually marks of spiritual maturity. If we combine all of the marks from 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:5-9 together, we discover that these men must have a pattern of life that has these qualities:

1. Total devotion to his wife - 1 Tim. 3:2
2. Avoids extremes and excesses in his life - 1 Tim. 3:2
3. Wisely establishes priorities - 1 Tim. 3:2
4. His conduct is respectable - 1 Tim. 3:2
5. Loves strangers (hospitable) - 1 Tim. 3:2
6. Skillful teacher of the Word - 1 Tim. 3:2
7. Not addicted to alcohol - Titus 1:7
8. Not given to physical violence - 1 Tim. 3:3
9. Gentle - yields his rights - 1 Tim. 3:3
10. Humble or not self-serving Titus 1:7
11. Not argumentative - 1 Tim. 3:3
12. Not quick tempered - Titus 1:7
13. Does not love money - 1 Tim. 3:3
14. Does not seek gain dishonestly Titus 1:7
15. Manages his home well - 1 Tim. 3:4
16. His children obey and respect him - 1 Tim. 3:4
17. His children are believers - Titus 1:6
18. His children are not rebellious Titus 1:6
19. Not a new believer - 1 Tim. 3:6
20. Loves goodness - Titus 1:8

21. Is holy - Titus 1:8
22. Law abiding, upright and honest - Titus 1:8
23. Restrains his fleshly desires - Titus 1:8
24. Faithful to the Word - Titus 1:8
25. Knows the Word and is able to defend it - Titus 1:8

These are high standards. They are high because 1 Peter 5:1-3 tells us that elders are to be shepherds of the flock. They are also supposed to teach the flock of God and to be godly examples. Now, how can an elder be a godly example to the flock if he does not live a consistent godly life himself? What credibility does he have to teach the Word of God if he himself is not godly? How can he care for others and pray effectively for people with any hope that his own prayers will be answered (James 5:16-17) if he is not holy himself? The answers to these questions are obvious. Unfortunately, so often churches ignore these high standards and select "warm bodies" in order to have enough men on a board of elders, board of directors, board of trustees or some other board. Some churches select community leaders, business men, wealthy individuals, or founding fathers of the church, making excuses or rationalizing their selection. But God has different criteria. He wants godly elders - men who are full of the Holy Spirit, humble, and obedient to the Word of God, men in whom the fruit of the Holy Spirit is evident. These are the type of men God intended to shepherd the flock of God and to be examples of godliness. If the church does not have this type of elders, then the ministry of the church will be severely hindered.

**PRIORITY TWO - TEACHING.** The second priority is that of teaching. Notice that Acts 2:42 starts by saying that the early believers were "continually devoting themselves" to the apostles' teaching. The Greek word that is translated as "devoting" is PROSKARTEREO. This means "to do something with intensity." The verb tense is a present participle. Taken together, this means these early believers were intensely and constantly giving themselves to four things: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer. The first priority was godly elders. The second priority was their teaching. Let's ask a key question. "How could ungodly elders impact the quality of the teaching in a church?" The

answer is obvious. The teaching will not be what it should be. The teaching will contain error because the Holy Spirit cannot work very effectively through ungodly elders or teachers. The elders will not have a godly perspective when it comes to what should occur. Their hearts will not be in it, except for maybe seeing the church grow in numbers or getting more money for the church bank account. They may articulate that the teaching is great, but their ungodly lifestyle reveals that they don't apply what they hear to themselves.

In Acts 6:1-4, we discover that a problem had occurred in the early church. The Greek widows were not properly being cared for. Therefore, the apostles directed that seven men be selected to care for the widows. But the elders would give themselves to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer. Here is their statement,

**So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Acts 6:2-4 (NASB)**

These men gave themselves to teaching and prayer and the people did too! What a wonderful picture.

But what type of teaching? The Greek word that is translated as teaching is DIDACHE. The Greek word means "to teach or give instruction." Today there are two very common types of sermons that a person may hear on Sunday morning. The first type is a topical sermon. The topical sermon focuses on topics such as anger, marriage, biblical principles of finance, abortion, or some other subject. The preacher or teacher usually uses a variety of scripture passages or none at all. His goal is not to teach the text but to apply scripture. The second most common type is expositional, verse-by-verse teaching. Here the preacher or teacher actually explains the meaning of words from the original language and the phrases of each verse of the passage. The preacher or teacher presents background information and cross-references as necessary. Other scriptures may be used to help explain the

passage. The goal of this type of sermon is to instruct the listener as to the meaning of the passage. Once the meaning is established, then the application follows. Application is not the ONLY goal of the passage. There are two goals: 1) to explain what God is saying in each verse and then 2) give the application.

Nehemiah 8:8-9 is a wonderful example of this type of teaching.

**They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Nehemiah 8:8-9 (NASB)**

Here we are told that the passage was read and then explained. They gave the sense of the passage. And look at the response of the people. They were weeping. How wonderful is that? They actually wept in response to the teaching. Nehemiah did not give a topical sermon. It explained the passage and then the application flowed. In 1 Timothy 4:12-16 we discover that Paul told Timothy to read, teach and exhort. Exhortation is the application. Then Paul proceeds in the following verses to encourage Timothy to be godly - to be an example to the flock. Teachers of the Word must also be followers of the Word of God. They must be hearers and doers - not just teachers.

What is the outcome of such teaching? Paul goes on and tells Timothy what will happen if he is serious about his teaching,

**Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. 1 Timothy 4:16 (NASB)**

When Paul says "ensure salvation . . . yourself and for those who hear you" he is not talking of another way to get into heaven. Paul has already told us that salvation is by faith alone in Jesus Christ and not the result of works (Eph. 2:8-

9). What Paul is talking about is the process of sanctification. Paul has already said in Philippians 2:12-13 that we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling and then he added, "But it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" in verse 13. The message is that we are to apply the teaching to ourselves. If the teaching is faulty and in error, then the people will be led astray and not live the godly life that God intended. Their spiritual growth will be blunted and hindered. But we must never forget that it is the Holy Spirit who makes the changes in us. We must eagerly be obedient while the Holy Spirit transforms us (Rom 12:1-2) by producing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23).

1 John 2:12-14 describes the result of godly, biblical teaching. This passage is about spiritual growth in the Christian life. It paints a picture of the process of spiritual growth using an illustration from our physical world. We are born into this world as little children, eventually become young men, and finally fathers, assuming we live long enough.

Little children are immature spiritually, while fathers are the most mature. Little children are typically new believers, but men and women who have been believers for a long time can still be little children spiritually.

Young men are described several ways. They overcome the evil one. That is, they are increasingly having victory over Satan. They are strong in faith and they know the Word of God. Hebrews 5:12-14 tells us that we are just spiritual babies if we do not know the Bible. This does not mean that the believer has only intellectual knowledge about the Bible. If that were true then he would not be described as overcoming the evil one and being strong in faith. It means he is being obedient to what he learns.

Spiritual fathers are a special group of Christians. Their sins are forgiven just as the sins of the spiritual child. They are growing in the fruit of the Spirit. They are strong in the scripture. But the outstanding mark of the spiritual father is that he "knows Him who has been from the beginning. Notice the additional phrase "from the beginning." This is never said of the spiritual child. Because the spiritual father knows scripture, he is able to know God the Father deeper and more intimately. One who seeks a knowledge of scrip-

ture and not a deep relationship with God will not become a spiritual father. Such a person can know about scripture but not the One who wrote it. Those who do not study scripture cannot know God as deeply as a friend knows a friend.

**PRIORITY THREE - FELLOWSHIP.** Acts 2:42 says that the early believers also gave themselves to fellowship. "Fellowship" refers "to sharing something together." Verses 44-47 reveal that they spent time together and supported one another financially. Verse 42 reveals that they worshipped together, had communion together and prayed together. True fellowship is centered around and motivated by the Word of God. Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us that believers need to be coming together for worship in order to "stimulate one another to love and good deeds." This will not happen if the believer is sitting at home listening to the church on the television or worshipping God in the great outdoors down at the swimming pool. In fact, they are in violation of God's commands. They are being disobedient. They cannot minister the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit gave them. Nor will they be able to receive a blessing from others who are ministering their spiritual gifts.

James 5:16 also tells us that we need to come together so that we can confess our faults and pray for one another. This is a biblical basis for counseling - helping other believers. The goal of fellowship is to show love, to give help and to encourage one another in the faith. If necessary, it includes church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18:15-20. Church discipline is actually an expression of love. It seeks to restore a sinning brother or sister from sin and to protect the church.

**PRIORITY FOURTH - COMMUNION.** The next priority of the early church was the remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. On the last night in which Jesus was betrayed, He told the disciples to do this in remembrance of Him (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:25). What did the early church do? They obeyed! It reveals that they loved Jesus. How often did they do that? The scriptures do not tell us. In my opinion, it should be done at least once a month.

**PRIORITY FIFTH - PRAYER.** Prayer was a priority of the early church. They were "continually devoted" to prayer. Solid, verse-by-verse teaching or instruction of the Word of God and prayer are the most neglected priorities in the

church today. Ephesians 6:18 says,

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints . . . Eph. 6:18 (NASB)

Here we are told to pray at all times for all the saints. Wow, wouldn't it be tremendous if believers actually did this. Imagine the impact on the church and our world. Prayer includes more than just asking for things. It includes giving praise to God and expressing our thankfulness. Prayer is a test of faith. It is an act of humility and a proof of our dependence upon Him.

**CONCLUSION.** Are these the priorities of your church? Are they your priorities? When you come to church, what are you looking for? Are you looking for a nice bulletin, contemporary music or a humorous pastor? What are *your* priorities?