

Four Attributes of a Healthy Church

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LEE’S SUMMIT, Mo.—In my hometown is a place I suppose everyone has heard of. It’s called Niagara Falls. Those of us who are from there are familiar with the geological history of the falls—how Lake Ontario receded from its original shores leaving an escarpment over which the waters from the other Great Lakes would cascade.

Over time (over long periods of time), that falls eroded its way upstream and is now situated a few miles south of its original position.

The process of erosion is still going on. But, if you were to visit Niagara Falls year after year, you probably wouldn’t notice it. It happens slowly, and except for an occasional rock slide you might not notice any change at all even over a period of decades. But the falls is eroding daily, little bit by little bit.

Erosion is like that. It happens slowly, imperceptibly. But it happens.

The same is true with our spiritual lives, and the same is true in the life cycle of a church congregation.

In the book *The Church Awakening* author and pastor Charles Swindoll observes that the church in the early portions of the book of Acts was Spirit-filled, a growing and dynamic group of dedicated Christians.

But later, as the decades wore on, the church’s spiritual strength eroded and waned. We see an entirely different dynamic at work, much of which we can deduce from Paul’s late-in-life letters (such as 2 Timothy).

Pastor Swindoll tells us that the early church employed four prerequisites that form the foundation for healthy congregations. Those prerequisites, derived from Acts 2:32-43, are:

- The apostle’s teaching
- Fellowship
- “Breaking of bread”
- Prayer

Pastor Swindoll asserts that healthy churches can certainly have more than these four elements including excellent music, community outreach and efficient administration. But, without these four foundational elements, the music service becomes mere entertainment, community service can become social-justice politics, and efficient church administration becomes a business venture.

Looking at these four prerequisites, how is your church doing?

Solid teaching

Do you leave church services with a better understanding of the Word of God and a greater connection with your Creator and Savior?

Or do you go home with a plate full of the same old pabulum rehashed in the same way week after week?

Or worse, are the messages turning to fables and abandoning sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3-4)?

Are the sermons solid teaching from of the Word?

How is your church doing with this?

Growing relationships

Are your closest friends in the world members of your fellowship?

Do you go home thankful for your fellow congregants?

Do you feel a connection with them born of the Holy Spirit?

By the same token, do your fellow congregants go home thankful for you?

Do they feel connected with you?

Do you feel free to be transparent with your brothers and sisters in Christ?

If not, is it because you are hiding behind a mask, or is it them not being able to keep your confidences? Neither situation is good.

How are you and your fellow congregants doing with this?

Hospitality and celebration

Then there is the "breaking of bread." Mr. Swindoll, as do many others, relates this to the taking of the Lord's Supper, but, given the context of Acts 2 ("Breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart"), it would appear this means something beyond a simple sharing of bread and wine to commemorate the sacrifice of Christ. This seems to be an act of hospitality and celebration.

Do you celebrate each other's joys?

Do you toast the blessing that God showers on your brothers and sisters, and do it in a public way?

If you have a prayer-and-share time in your congregation, how many prayer requests are for alleviation of trials and how many are praises to God for blessings?

Do we rejoice when a fellow believer rejoices, and do we mourn when he mourns?

How does your church measure up against this?

Prayer for each other

Finally, there is prayer.

Do you pray fervently and without ceasing for each other?

Or is it a one-and-done kind of thing?

In the church during the early chapters in Acts, the brethren seemed to be constantly praying and praying as a group. Look at these examples.

In Acts 4:23-31 they prayed for boldness to speak the Word and that miracles would be a sign to the world that God was with them.

In Acts 6:6 they prayed that God would guide their decisions.

In Acts 12:5 they prayed that Peter would be released from prison.

I could go on, but you get the idea.

So how are you and your church doing? Has your spiritual health eroded?