

Who Needs Prayer Meeting?

By Oliver Price

Prayer connects the church with the Lord Jesus Christ. No other religious leader can do it. He alone is able to fill His church with His own life and power, take control of it and run it from heaven. We all need prayer meeting for unity, revival, evangelism and worship.

"The church is dying on its feet because it is not living on its knees," the sign on a neighborhood church proclaims.

"I never cease to be amazed at the church's neglect of true, heartfelt, corporate prayer." says George Verwer, director of Operation Mobilization. After visiting thousands of churches around the world, Verwer concludes that most churches essentially have no prayer meeting. Some have canceled midweek services for lack of interest. Others have shifted to Bible study or activities, allowing only a brief five or ten minutes for prayer.

Yet a few are attempting to overcome the general neglect of corporate prayer with encouraging results. They see signs that the praying associated with the early church may be revived. What can we do to help?

First, we need a fresh understanding of the purpose of corporate prayer, its priority in the church, and the moral and spiritual power it provides. Prayer meeting can be one of the most satisfying and attractive meetings in the church.

PRAYER BRINGS UNITY

Prayer connects the church with its Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Any believer (or congregation) can lose "connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Col. 2:19).

Jesus Christ alone is able to fill His church with His own life and power. He alone is able to take immediate control of His church and run it from heaven by His Spirit.

The church is more than a community of doctrine. It is a community of life and love in union with our Lord Himself. We can meet Him and talk to Him in prayer. His church began as a prayer meeting. (Acts 1:14).

Just as children share life and love with their parents, so the church family should share life and love with Christ. But though the tie of life cannot be broken, the tie of love can be neglected and even severed.

The parent who loses the love of a child is left hurt and empty. The unresponsive church grieves God in the same way. The church at Ephesus neglected its first love, and Christ warned it to repent or He would remove the light from its midst (Rev. 2:4-5). The Laodicean church became lukewarm, and Christ said He was ready to spew it out of His mouth. (Rev. 3:16).

A church committed to prayer will notice if love is missing from fellowship. One pastor tells of a time when he sensed that the Spirit was quenched in his church. He canceled his Sunday night sermon and spoke briefly about his concerns. Then he asked the people to bow their heads and each one who felt he had quenched the Spirit to raise his hand. Nearly every hand went up. That night the service ran late as the people cleared their consciences toward God and one another.

PRAYER BRINGS REVIVAL

When the congregational conscience is clear, prayer will flourish. This was demonstrated in a spiritual awakening that came to 22 churches in Bemidji, Minn., during a four-week course led by Ralph and Lou Sutera in 1986.

"As I listened, I realized I was walking without God's power," said Larry Forsberg, pastor of First Baptist Church. "God met me that night. I had a cleansing I had never experienced before. God opened the windows of heaven."

After the spiritual awakening the churches discovered a new interest in prayer. Pastor Alan Johnson commented, "Our midweek prayer meeting had

become a Bible study. Now the whole time is given to prayer. Attendance has increased, too."

"And since the crusade, we have designated a room for prayer," Johnson explained. "At the close of our services we invite people there, where trained prayer partners are waiting to pray with them."

Mrs. Johnson said, "We have seen marriages restored, restitution made, and people walking in victory. We have had a church revival you would dream about."

These pastors agree that the secret of the crusade was "the Holy Spirit working in answer to prayer" - a small group had been meeting in united prayer for four years before this breakthrough. And they realize that the fruit of the revival must be preserved through congregational prayer, faith, and obedience.

PRAYER BRINGS EVANGELISM

James McConnell, pastor of Metropolitan Church in Whitewell, Belfast, Northern Ireland, has made prayer meeting a priority.

Every Monday night at 8 about 800 gather for 30 minutes of singing and Bible reading. They spend an hour and 15 minutes in prayer, following one simple rule to maintain a high level of interest and participation.

"Let's be honest," McConnell says, "prayer meetings are boring." First Mr. Hall prays for eight minutes. Then Granny Burns prays for ten minutes. Six people take over the prayer meeting. Everybody else sits as a spectator and then goes home.

"There is no way I would go to a prayer meeting like that. Our rule is that each person prays for one minute. You can say a lot in one minute."

Some take liberties of two or three minutes, but the people try to keep their prayers short and to the point. Thus an average of 40 people pray each meeting.

Prayer meetings are the key to advancing the work of the gospel at Metropolitan. When the church rented spacious King's Hall for an evangelistic meeting, doubters questioned such a bold step.

But beginning two weeks before the meeting, the church prayed for an hour and a half every morning and evening. In the middle of each day, the people passed out tracts-totaling a half million copies. More than 8,500 people showed up for that meeting. In one night, 250 came to Christ.

Only rarely does a prayer meeting today focus on shaking nations for God. We tend to ignore Satan's moral and spiritual attacks and focus instead on our temporal and material needs. Yet God has commissioned the church to restrain the rulers of darkness through prayer warfare (Eph. 6:10-18).

Is the church losing this war by default? Erwin Lutzer, senior pastor of Chicago's Moody Church, writes that the evangelical church is like a sinking ship. The world is pouring its immoral influence into the church instead of the church restraining sin in the world.

Prayer for personal, visible needs are not enough. We need prayer devoted to keeping ourselves completely loyal to Christ in a hostile world. Some of Paul's prayers provide good examples of this (Eph. 3:14-21; Col. 1:9-14; 1 Thess., 3:11-13).

The apostles' priorities were prayer and the ministry of the Word. (Acts 6:4). Those priorities were shared by the first believers, who steadfastly communed with Christ and lived together under His immediate Lordship (Acts 1:14, 4:23-35; 12:5-17.)

PRAYER BRINGS BOLDNESS

Acts 4:23-35 provides a model of powerful prayer. Peter and John had been seized and jailed by the Sanhedrin for spreading the gospel and healing a crippled beggar. Upon their release they were commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus. The Sanhedrin's threats were not to be taken lightly.

Peter and John returned to the Christian community, and those who heard their report raised their voices in a remarkable prayer, which focuses entirely on God. First, they recognized that He is their Creator; they belong to Him (v. 24). Those who oppose them oppose God, as did those who crucified Jesus (vv. 25-27).

God could have stopped His enemies, but He saw fit to sacrifice His Son to provide salvation (v.28). God might also sacrifice believers' lives for the

higher goals of this battle. Even so they volunteered to be His "servants". (v. 29).

They did not ask for protection, only for boldness to speak His Word. (v. 29).

In this way, they kept their love for Him alive and stayed completely loyal in the face of severe trials.

When they finished praying, they received a fresh filling of the Spirit along with boldness and power to witness (vv. 31,33). They had a deeper oneness of heart and soul (v. 32) and amazing generosity (vv. 32, 34-35).

In this same spirit, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers as he died under their blows. (Acts 7:59-60). They killed his body, but could not escape the conviction his love brought to their spirits. (Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-58; 9:1-6). To reveal the moral excellence of Christ to our dark world, we need soldiers who can suffer injustice and even die praying for the forgiveness of those who harm them.

The ability to overcome evil with good is nurtured and brought to maturity in the kind of prayer meeting we see in Acts 4. Worshipping prayers offered in the heat of battle are the key to moral and spiritual power in our conflicts.

PRAYER BRINGS WORSHIP

In the prayer meetings in his congregation, Mark Bubeck, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Sioux City, Iowa, emphasizes worship.

Through worship, Danny Whiting a dentist in Sioux City, not only learned how to face life's trials, but also added new meaning to his prayer life. "I learned to worship God by praying with Pastor Bubeck and a group of men on Sunday morning," he says.

"This opened up a whole new vista for me. I have gained a new perspective on my troubles. It has changed the way I view my family, and I have a new motive for evangelism, growing out of the love within me. I used to be driven to witness by guilt."

"Our fellowship in prayer helps strengthen one another," says Eldy Lindstrom, who attends Plano Bible Chapel in Dallas. "As we share our tears

and our good and bad times in prayer, we see God's personal care for the body."

As Andrew Murray put it, "It is in the union and fellowship of believers that the Spirit can manifest His full power."

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