

The Vital Place of the Prayer Meeting

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It is said that the weekly prayer meeting is the spiritual barometer for any local church. You can tell with a fair degree of accuracy what the church is like by the demeanour or substance of the weekly prayer meeting. Is there genuine evangelistic concern? If so it will be expressed in the prayers. Is there a heartfelt longing for the conversion of unconverted family members? If so that is sure to surface. Is there a world vision and a fervent desire for revival and the glory of our Redeemer among the nations of the world? Such a burden cannot be suppressed. Is there a heart agony about famine and war and the need for the gospel of peace among the suffering multitudes of mankind? The church prayer meeting will answer that question. Intercession in the prayer meeting will soon reveal a loving church that cares for those who are oppressed and weighed down with trials and burdens. Those bearing trials too painful or personal to be described in public will nevertheless find comfort in the prayer meeting, for there the Holy Spirit is especially at work.

A DAILY CHURCH PRAYER MEETING

One of the results of the revival in Korea is the multiplication of daily early morning prayer meetings. I questioned a Korean pastor recently and he assured me that daily early morning prayer meetings (5am in summer and 6am in winter) are part of the lifestyle of evangelical Christians of all denominations. Are these Koreans more angels than men?! Yet Bob Sheehan told me that as a boy he was impressed by the devotion of his father, a working man who laboured from 7am to 7pm daily, yet attended without fail a prayer meeting at 6am on his way to work!

In 1866 Spurgeon instituted daily prayer meetings at the Tabernacle, 7 every morning and again 7:30 each evening.¹ The main Tabernacle prayer meeting took place on Monday evenings attended by over 3,000. To provide for participation there was an obvious need of supplementary times of prayer for smaller groups within the church.

The book *Only a Prayer Meeting*² by C. H. Spurgeon consists mostly of brief addresses given at the Monday evening prayer meeting, but does not describe the mechanics of how the church prayer meeting functioned with so many present. Visitors to Romania have observed that in their large church prayer meetings it is the custom to designate a section of the assembled company as solely responsible for the prayers. In this way those in one part of a gallery or one section of the seating on the lower deck are responsible to pray out with enough volume to reach the corners of the auditorium. Prayers are fervent and in rapid succession.

THE THEOLOGY OF PRAYER

'Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God *for the things agreeable to his will*, in the name of Christ, *by the help of his Spirit*, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.'³ How can we be in accord with the will of the Holy Spirit unless he creates those desires in us? When the Holy Spirit works powerfully then there is not enough time for everyone who wishes to participate. When he is absent then spiritual deadness prevails. How can we express the burdens and concerns of the Holy Spirit except by prayer? The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we should pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans which words cannot express (Rom 8:26).

Spiritual repentance is the creation of the Spirit. 'They shall look upon the One whom they have pierced and mourn and grieve bitterly for him' (Zech 12:10). There was no repentance in King David concerning his adultery and murder until he was convicted by the Holy Spirit. Psalm 51 was the outcome. Desire for the glory of Christ and a burden to pray for his Kingdom to prosper is also the creation of the Holy Spirit. At the same time such concern is our responsibility. It is sinful to be fatalistic and say to ourselves, 'Well, we will be more attentive and lively in prayer when the Spirit comes to us!' No! That

will not do! We are exhorted to stir ourselves up to prayer, but at the same time we must rely on the Spirit.

But, we reason, will our prayers achieve anything of moment? Hasn't the Lord made up his mind what he is going to do? This brings us back to the tension of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We must uphold both to the full. We are answerable to the Lord by way of dependence upon him through his Word and by prayer. That is our way of life, and the extent to which we follow that will reflect in our entire way of life and be the measure of our peace, joy, and happiness.

Prayer as dependence upon the Father and the means of guidance is seen in the prayer life of our Lord. He is divine, yet his divinity did not lessen his need to pray. He was in prayer at the time of his baptism (Luke 3:21). He rose very early while it was still dark to go to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). He spent a whole night in prayer before choosing his apostles (Luke 6:12). He was in prayer when he was transfigured (Luke 9:29). Prayer was the means of his agonising his way to victory in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44).

The phrase 'prepared to do any good work' (2 Tim 2:21) literally 'having been prepared to every good work,'⁴ suggests that all that we do requires preparation in prayer. All that we do requires spiritual motivation and wisdom. Our works therefore need to be prepared in prayer. Obviously we must be governed by common sense. We can't close our eyes for prayer every time we come to traffic lights. Prayerfulness is an attitude and there are all kinds of prayer (Eph 6:18; Phil 4:6).

IS THERE ADEQUATE CHURCH PRAYER MEETING TIME?

Consider the subjects that cry out for intercession: family concerns and anxieties, church issues, the ongoing evangelistic scenario, sister churches and ministers in particular, regional and national concerns, the world of missions, missionaries including members of our own church labouring abroad, the global situation with several nations experiencing the agony of civil war, drought, famine, or extreme poverty, the desperate need for stable government and rulers of integrity (1 Tim 2:1-4).

If we are not to succumb to a feeling of being overwhelmed we will need a structure of subjects. Specific prayer should be encouraged and individuals should be mentioned by name. Note the individuals named by Paul in Romans 16; and to the Colossians whom he had never met he wrote, 'For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have never stopped praying for you' (Col 1:6).

Is one prayer meeting a week sufficient? If we are to pray in a way which is worthy of so great a Majesty should a local church not offer more opportunity for praying together? Those with family responsibility find it difficult enough to attend every second week. Some churches have a short prayer meeting before the Sunday evening service, an excellent preparation for worship, but hardly adequate if that is the only time for some church members.

WHAT ABOUT THE WEAK?

In most churches there are members who never attend the communion service and who rarely if ever attend the weekly prayer meeting. What can be done? Spiritual life and growth is akin to horticulture. Plants can be nurtured and cultured but there is no way that they can be forced to grow. The Lord is gentle with the weak,

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out (Isa 42:3,4).

There are some in the body who possess the gift of exhortation (Rom 12:8). That gift wisely employed can be most effective for stirring believers to faithful attendance at the prayer meeting.

IS THE WEEKLY PRAYER MEETING MARKED IN YOUR DIARY?

It is customary to mark engagements in our diary. If meeting the King with our fellow believers is important it will surely be reserved in our diary. Invitations to dinner or to recreational events will have to be fitted in elsewhere. Jesus says that we have not because we fail to ask (James 4:2). Is the audience with our Monarch esteemed by you as a priority? Does your diary reflect that fact?

THE IMPORTANCE OF VERSATILE LEADERSHIP AT THE CHURCH PRAYER MEETING

In a previous article with the title *A Lively and Edifying Prayer Meeting*⁵ I urged that a leadership of common sense is needed up front for an edifying prayer meeting. The leader must come thoroughly prepared himself, ready to encourage with appropriate scriptures and information and exhortation. He should encourage participation. Also he may need to remind participants not to be too long, but not so short as to be trite. Also it may be needful to go privately to individual participants who fall into a bad habit of which there are several. For instance the eccentricity of preaching instead of praying or the oddity of telling the Lord all the biblical texts which have been memorised when he obviously knows them already. Information before prayer, compressed, crisp, clear, is vital. Those who come tired and who feel spiritually apathetic or perhaps downright rebellious need pithy biblical reminders of what praying is all about. The leader up front must be in touch with the feelings of those present.

Helpful examples can be cited of means employed to stimulate prayer. A well prepared brief information focus is hard to beat. For instance a five minute feature using an atlas and extracts from OPERATION WORLD is the practice at the midweek prayer meeting at Kings Chapel, West Chester, USA. It is most effective as a 'prayer quickener.' The Baptist Church in Hillcrest, Natal, South Africa, do the same thing in the Lord's Day morning service and include the outline as part of the printed bulletin—excellent for getting out of parochiality and promoting a vision for world missions.

Leaders should encourage freedom so that there is no embarrassment for those who can only stay for a while. The notice used for the prayer meeting which proved the genesis of the 1858 revival in New York read as follows:

DAILY PRAYER MEETING
from 12 to 1 o'clock
STOP
5, 10, 20 mins
or the whole hour as your time permits

THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH PRAYER MEETING ILLUSTRATED FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS

The place and importance of the church prayer meeting can be seen from the opening chapters of the book of Acts. Pentecost was born out of the church prayer meeting. We are not told how often the disciples adjourned for refreshments but we know they continued earnestly in prayer until the Holy Spirit came in power. How many today really believe in praying for revival? Soon after Pentecost when there were serious setbacks, fierce persecution threatened the cause, and the apostles were forbidden to preach any more. What could be done? There was only one answer. The church prayer meeting. They got together and told the Lord all about it. He responded by giving the building a gentle shake, a token of his support! Later persecution raged again. James was beheaded. Peter was arrested and imprisoned. What did the disciples do? They had only one recourse. The church prayer meeting. As on former occasions it was daily and continued for eight days right up to the eve of the hour when Peter was to be executed. In answer to their intercession the Lord sent an angel who took Peter out of his chains and through the locked doors as effortlessly as a great liner sails out to sea.

Where did Peter go when he found himself free? Why, he went to the church prayer meeting! How did he know where to find the prayer meeting? Do you think that the leading apostle would not know where to find the prayer meeting? And when he arrived it took time to get in because they could hardly believe it was Peter, alive and well! Why did they find it hard to believe? Because like us they only half believed in the effectual nature of prayer.

Further on in the book of Acts we learn that the first church in Europe had its genesis in a prayer meeting for women (Acts 16:13).

REVIVAL AND IMPROVEMENTS AT THE CHURCH PRAYER MEETING

We stand in urgent need of revival personally, in our churches, nationally, and internationally. When revival comes he who is the Spirit will almost certainly begin to stir us in our private prayers and in our church prayer meetings. There is room for occasional united church prayer meetings. The biblical base

for a concert of prayer involving several churches is described in the book *Give Him no Rest*.⁶ Spiritual impetus can come from other evangelical churches.

Revivals always seem to have their genesis in prayer meetings. I conclude by recommending a book just published by the Banner of Truth, *The Power of Prayer*.⁷ Written by an eye witness, Samuel Prime, it describes how a great national revival began with a small prayer meeting. The local church weekly prayer meeting is the best place to call upon the Lord to revive his work. He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Eph 3:20).

NOTES

1 *The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, Holden Pike, Banner of Truth, 1992 (The original six volumes are bound in two in this new set. The reference is found in the original vol. 3 page 183).

2 *Only a Prayer Meeting*, C H Spurgeon, 367 pages, Pilgrim Publishers, Box 66, Pasadena, TX 77501, USA.

3 This definition is composed from the Larger and Shorter Catechisms and cited in B. M. Palmer's book *Theology of Prayer*.

4 *hetoimasmenon* is a perfect passive.

5 *Reformation Today* 95, now available only in the bound volume 91-110.

6 *Give Him no Rest*, Erroll Hulse, pages 90ff and 124ff. EP. 144pp.

7 *The Power of Prayer, The New York Revival of 1858*, Samuel Prime, 263pp bound.