

Prioritizing Prayer

Within the church, prioritizing prayer and establishing a culture of prayer go hand in hand. The practice of prayer cannot become a cultural norm if we fail to properly understand the centrality that God Himself places upon it. Like anything else, if we have no developed vision for prayer we, in essence, have no recourse but to systematically digress from it as it will inevitably become crowded out by that demand which screams loudest in any given moment. I would like to offer a tripartite perspective related to prayer that I think helps to define its biblical necessity in this current hour.

Three Critical Dynamics of Biblical Prayer

I have found that the subject of prayer from a biblical vantage-point, especially as it relates to the understanding of the kingdom of God at large, can be separated into three strands that together form the bedrock foundation for spiritual life, corporate community and walking in the Great Commission. First, though, let me say this. From the divine perspective, prayer is not simply utilitarian. In other words, it is never reduced to “*how things get done*” in the church. In addition, biblical prayer is not simply needs-based. Our lack, needs, and deficiencies are not to be the sole determining factors that fuel our prayer meetings. And finally, I want to add that prayer is not part of some cold, mechanistic system resolutely designed to produce holiness at any cost. Below I want to introduce and itemize what I consider to be the three-pillars of biblical prayer on which the church must rest in these last days.

Introducing the Three Pillars

Prayer Fuels Confidence in God

When speaking of the value of prayer I like to begin in the arena of personal relationship with God. Jesus often withdrew in secret to pray (Mt.14:23, 26:36; Lk.6:12; Jn.17). And He told us that when we pray to the Father we are to pray in secret where only He sees and rewards (Mt.6:5-7). This was in direct contrast to certain religious leaders of the day, who prayed, but with the impetus of their prayer being the public accolades of bystanders. Many have defined prayer as conversation with God and with this I agree. But God speaks in manifold ways and I don't believe that we should limit this conversation to what we imagine He might be saying back to us or to whether or not we have had some type of special experience during our prayer time. I do believe that God does release impressions to us as we pray and that we can even experience the sense of His presence as well, but there is something even deeper that happens as we resign ourselves to the ministry of devotional prayer. The apostle Paul taught the Corinthian church that the Holy Spirit reveals the deep things of God to us (1 Cor.2:9-12; Ps.42:7), and to the Roman congregations, this same Holy Spirit, the Spirit of prayer, “*helps us to pray*” (Rom.8:26). God does more than listen as we speak, He is the agency by which that divine conversation takes place. Paul prayed for the Ephesian church that they would be strengthened with might “*in the inner man*” by the Spirit (Eph.3:16-19). As we pray God releases the power of the Spirit to us, imparting strength, boldness, faith, righteousness and much, much more. There is a divine transaction that takes place *within* us as we are consistent in prayer. This transaction is what fuels our inward life in God. It's how we resist the flesh and live according to the Spirit

(Rom.8:5). As we learn to walk in the Spirit, we learn to walk in agreement with the heart of God. As we walk in agreement with God, we will begin to pray in agreement with His will. This is what the anointing of the Spirit produces in our lives; a supernatural ability to receive, believe, and obey God, and this divine unction is reflected as God anoints us to pray (Rom.8:27). And I want to add one more thing to all of this. When I think of biblical prayer, I remember that around the very throne of God right now intercession is mingled with worship (Rev.4-5). There is a Spirit of revelation in operation there that plunges its rapt audience into an endless ocean of delight as cries of, *“Holy, Holy, Holy!”* are seamlessly woven together with songs of praise, thanksgiving and adoration. In contrast, our prayers can so often seem shallow and awkward. And when we assess the impact of our personal prayer life measured solely by how we feel or the tangible results that we can see in the short-term we usually end up with every reason to abandon ship. But when we include the divine perspective and panorama that scripture provides us we begin to understand that engaging in prayer is the doorway into discovering and experiencing every good thing *“which God has prepared for those who love Him”*. This type of prayerful engagement with the Holy Spirit propels us into transformative processes of God whereby we behold Him and gradually become like Him (2 Cor.3:18) as we are filled with all the fullness of God (Eph.3:19). This type of interaction with God through prayer is what produces a supernatural unity with the Godhead (Jn.17:21-23) and the very platform from which we begin to encounter the full weight of His affections for us. Discovering the affections of God in prayer is what motivates us to hunger and thirst for His presence and settles in our spirits that we are indeed His workmanship (Eph.2:10; Phil.2:1; Col.1:16), created for His pleasure and we can have confidence that He is for us and that He enjoys us even as He perfects us.

Prayer is Central to Congregational Life

Next, we move on to the corporate dynamic of life in God. Many times when we think about how and where prayer fits within the corporate context of the body of Christ we see it marginalized to the “prayer warriors” meeting once a week in the church basement, before really important meeting or outreach projects or maybe in a short season of consecration as a new year begins. But have we really uncovered its true worth within the family from a biblical perspective? Consider Paul’s exhortation to Timothy where he tells him, as a young leader, to pursue his spiritual life in the midst of those that pray with a sincere heart (2 Tim.2:22 NKJV). As I mentioned above, an anointed prayer life will always go hand in hand with those who are giving themselves to growing into the fullness of the knowledge of Christ. And this is the group that Paul is telling Timothy to fit in with so to speak, as opposed to those who have made a profession to godliness but are living in compromise (v.22a) or those who are only interested in bolstering their own reputations (v.23). And understanding that Paul is speaking to Timothy on what we might call a leadership level we can begin to see part of what I consider the apostolic strategy for developing and sustaining healthy, Spirit-led communities of faith. Paul isn’t saying to pastor Timothy, *“Support the intercessors in your church”*, he is saying, *“Join them!”* When we examine the inclination of the early church at its very inception we can’t help but notice the centrality of prayer in the small group that met in an upper room to wait for the promise of the Father (Ac.1:14). Their dynamic progression of course is realized by future statements such as, *“They continued steadfastly...in prayers.”* (Ac.2:42). Prayer was central to the early church because it was essential for the release of power and it was the driving force for the way that they continued in the love of the Spirit for one another (Ac.4:32,34). And again, as in the case of Paul to Timothy, some years later, the apostles, speaking at a leadership level, make this definitive declaration concerning their priorities, *“But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”* (Ac.6:4). This wasn’t some rally-cry to mobilize a congregation to participate in an important meeting, it was a determined resolution to create a

foundation for the apostolic church regarding the necessity of prayer for both life and godliness. Prayer was central to life in the Spirit on both a personal and a congregational level. Additionally, in continuing on with the theme of a convergence of worship and prayer from the previous section, I want to mention something that Paul taught the Ephesian church. He exhorts them to *“Understand what the will of the Lord is...do not be drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.”* (Eph. 5:17-2; cf. Col.3:16). The Spirit, through Paul, gives the Ephesian church an important key in maintaining the unity of the Spirit as a body. Sing together! Corporate worship releases the activity of the spirit to the people of God. Paul says, *“be filled with the Spirit”*. He means that in order to take what we have positionally, that is the fullness of the Spirit in our regenerate human spirit, and apply it practically to our inward man we are to declare the praises and affirmations of God together in song. This is where true unity in the faith begins. The people of God declaring the truth of God together in agreement with the Spirit produces a likemindedness about those things that God considers excellent (Phil.1:9-10; Rom. 15:5,6). The impact of which, Paul adds, results in sincere love for one another without offense. Imagine a people in a city, or in a local congregation engaging with one another in sincerity, without offense and producing the righteousness of Christ throughout their various expressions together!

Prayer and the Great Commission

Over the years I have observed the tendency for a peculiar tension to manifest in certain conversations where intercession and the great commission are pitted against one another. One side champions the necessity of prayer in releasing the power of the Spirit to an individual, city or nation, while the other side defends the importance of being the actual agency through which the Spirit moves by way of our preaching, teaching and serving. Jesus taught His disciples to, *“Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”* (Lk.10:2). Here, in this short command, Jesus highlights the partnership of intercession and evangelism. Likewise, Paul prayed for both an open door to preach and that words would be given to him to release the gospel in boldness (Eph.6:16; Col.4:2-4). He recognized that neither crafty strategy nor zeal and passion for the harvest alone were sufficient for winning the lost. A bible-based theology tells us that God is the ultimate catalyst for calling the lost (Rom.1:7; 1 Thess.2:12; 1 Pt.2:9b; Heb.4:7), drawing them to Jesus (Jn. 6:44), and providing both the desire to respond (Phil.1:29) and the means to repent (Ac.11:18; 2 Tim.2:25). Now this reality does not absolve us from effort in evangelism but rather serves to illustrate that without the anointing of the Spirit it would be impossible for the dead to come to life, for it is He who calls and *“gives life to the dead”* (Rom. 4:17 cf.Jn.6:33,63). On a slightly different, yet still related note, I have always found it striking that Jesus gave the command to *“Go!”* and then He gave the command to *“Wait!”* Let me explain. In Matthew 28:16 Jesus commands His disciples to go into all the world and make disciples, preaching, teaching etc. We know this as the Great Commission. But, later, immediately before His ascension into Heaven, *“He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father.”* (Ac.1:4). The commission was a real, literal charge to evangelize the lost, preach the kingdom and make disciples as He had done. But that short season of prayerful waiting in the upper room released an explosion of power in the Spirit necessary for them to function in the full measure of their calling. Consider the words of Isaiah, *“Therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you...Blessed are all those who wait for Him...He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.”* To paraphrase, God releases a supernatural grace to walk in obedience to the Spirit as we commit to waiting on Him in the place of prayer. And this of course includes evangelism and outreach. To the remnant charged with restoring the place of prayer in Zechariah’s day,

God promised them that He would release a supernatural supply of the Spirit's power and presence as they labored together in obedience to fulfill the word of the Lord in their generation (Zech.4:1-14). The principle of anointed intercession that accelerates the work of the kingdom is consistent throughout the course of scripture. Now, one last thing that I would like to comment on is the archetypical nature of prayer and worship related to discipleship. As we have noted above, prayer fuels the ingathering of the harvest and accelerates the work of the kingdom, but that's not the end of the matter. As we know, salvation isn't the end of the story, it's just the beginning. The scripture is consistent in its witness that humanity is fashioned to reflect the glory of God (Is.43:7; Matt.5:16, 1 Cor.10:31). We are created in His image (Gen.1:26), crowned with His glory (Ps.8:5) and brought near that we might experience the fullness of His excellence and perfection forever. At the deepest levels, man was created for communion with God. Those that have turned from their sin and put their hope in Christ have the Spirit of glory abiding within them right now that they might know Him (1 Cor.2:12). And this is precisely why worship and prayer are fundamental related to discipleship. The very essence of what intercession and worship embody serves as the premium context for growing in the knowledge of Christ. We were created to encounter God. When one is delivered *"from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love"* (Col.1:13) we are delivered for the sake of His glory, to know Him (Phil.3:10) and to behold Him that we also might be transformed into His glorious image (2 Cor.3:18). We are not saved primarily so that we can evangelize the lost or serve in the church, but so often that's the primary message being conveyed, whether intentional or not. *We are made to know Him!* We are created to worship Him as the consummation of endless and eternal engagement in His presence. We do not have to wait for the age to come to begin to encounter the risen Christ. We can begin by becoming prayerful students of the word who learn to focus our love on Him in settings of corporate worship and corporate pursuit of His purposes in intercession. Consider this. *"Therefore, do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God."* (Eph.5:18-20). I recognize a distinct discipleship context in this passage. Paul is speaking as an elder and pioneer in the faith to a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, city-wide, congregational church network regarding basic issues of corporate-spiritual life and practice. In essence he tells them, concerning their former conduct, *"Use wisdom, understand what the will of the Lord is. Don't do what you used to do." "Instead, be filled with the Spirit and walk in His power, and you'll overcome the will of the flesh." "When you're together, sing." "Use the scripture as the basis for your worship. Be like a singing seminary to one another." "Meet regularly and release and treasure the word of the Lord together and watch what happens." "And you, pray." "Maintain the presence of the Spirit in your midst by learning to appreciate what He's done and praising Him for it." "Walk in the power of the Spirit this way and God will release understanding to help you with every area of your life practically and spiritually."* We are a priesthood of believers, a priesthood. And we are to function as one forever. The advent of an indescribably striking new age is nearly upon us. An age where the knowledge of God is set as the crown-jewel on a diadem of the relentless perpetuity of eternal worship and intercession. This is who will be and this is who we are now.

Summary

In summary, I believe that the biblical revelation that prayer is central to fueling personal relationship with God, agreement as a corporate people, and ushering in the great harvest of souls at the end of the age is in fact a non-negotiable component of spiritual and practical life that when ignored will be reflected both in the normative culture within the church and in an impotent expression of the gospel out from the church. In this hour may our cry to heaven be, **"Lord, teach us to pray!"**

