

Apostolic Foundations: Intercession and Worship

WHY DO WE PRAY AND WORSHIP?

Christianity, as a whole, is facing an unprecedented identity crisis. With the global landscape changing so rapidly it brings tremendous pressure to every sphere of society. This type of pressure forces people to have to turn inward for answers. What do I believe? Why do I believe it? What's important? And this is no less true for the Christian. All over the earth Christianity is being redefined, either in line with the apostolic faith and values of the early church or further into the grey of postmodern relativism where anything goes and everything is permissible. But for those whose treasure is to walk with God and to do His will we are compelled by scripture to earnestly contend for the faith (Jude 3). We are to stand in defense of that which the scripture holds dear and this is no easy task as there are, by some estimates, tens-of-thousands of denominations in the Christian church world-wide, many holding fast to doctrines and theologies which differ widely from one another.

A STARTING POINT

If we look carefully, we will find that the challenge mentioned above is nothing new. This same problem faced the early church on more than one occasion. Acts 6:4 gives us a glimpse into what I would consider to be the most formative of those occasions. As explosive growth impacted the apostles' newly formed congregation it became easily apparent that changes were needed. It was probably within the first 2-3 years that Peter makes the statement, *"but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* According to some commentators there could have been as many as 15,000-25,000 believers at this point, though not all of them living in the immediate area surrounding Jerusalem (Ac.2:5-11). As the work load grew, the pressure on their time and physical energy increased. This caused the apostles to have to think critically about what was most important to them. Because their decisions would become the practice of the early church, it was absolutely necessary that they knew how to go forward. And so, Peter gives what I consider to be the central apostolic priorities of the first-century church; prayer and the study of the scriptures. And if, under the weight of stewarding a massive network of house churches, responding to the rapid increase of persecution and learning to walk with the Spirit, the final outcome was prayer and bible-study, how much more ought we to embrace those priorities today?

WHY WAS PRAYER CENTRAL TO THE APOSTLES?

JESUS PRAYED

I believe that there are many answers to this question but I want to highlight the three that I think are foundational to where Jesus is leading the church in this hour. First, prayer is what the disciples watched Jesus do. Luke records in his gospel, *“So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed”* (Lk.5:16). Jesus was routinely followed, harassed and intruded upon. His time was in constant demand. In addition to this He walked nearly everywhere He went and He gave long hours to ministry which taxed Him, body and soul. Jesus never wavered in His commitment to prayer, ever. He began His public ministry on the heels of 40 days of prayer and fasting (Mk.1:12-13) and finished by agonizing in intercession in the garden at Gethsemane while His disciples slept (Mt.26:36-46). His last words on the cross were in prayer to His Father in Heaven (Lk.23:46). I believe that as their workload increased, and armed with a different perspective, the apostles were able to reflect on all that they had witnessed Jesus do in His own ministry. If He prayed, so must they. He had modeled the way forward and it was true, *“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor is a servant above his master.”* (Mt.10:24).

JESUS TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES TO PRAY

Secondly, Jesus taught His disciples to pray. He taught them not to pray like certain religious leaders who wanted to appear deeply spiritual in front of others (Mt.6:5) or thought perhaps they could manipulate God into giving them what they wanted by praying a certain way (Mt.6:7). Instead, Jesus instructed His disciples to engage in a life of consistent intercession and devotional prayer (Mt.6:6) and to be relentless (Mt.7:7) in contending for justice in society with great zeal (Lk.18:1-8). He told them to make intercession for those who would mistreat them (Mt.5:44) and to pray for breakthrough in evangelism (Lk.10:2). He taught them that prayer was a part of watchfulness and would help to guard them from spiritual deception in key seasons (Mt.26:36-46). He told them that prayer releases the supernatural power of the Spirit in ministry (Mt.17:21) and strengthens other believers in times of great trial (Lk.22:31-32). In Lk.4:16 we learn that Jesus participated in regular times of corporate prayer in the synagogue in Nazareth and also during His itinerancy (Mt.4:23, 9:35). In first-century Palestine, the synagogue functioned a bit like the local church does today. Prayer was central to its purpose as was the study of the scripture. Jesus’ life and ministry were absolutely absorbed in both corporate and personal prayer, and seeing the impact of these realities in His life and ministry, his disciples said, *“Lord, teach us to pray.”* (Lk.11:1).

THE DISCIPLES ASKED JESUS TO TEACH THEM TO PRAY

As mentioned above, Jesus’ disciples asked Him to tutor them in prayer. The gospel narrative portrays the disciple’s early commitment to prayer as lacking, to say the least. But now that they are living in the throws of great revival in the aftermath of Acts 2 it is obvious to them that they are in over their heads. In Mt.18:18-20 [cf. Mt.16:19] Jesus appoints His disciples as His successors by imparting to them the same level of authority which He recognizes the scribes and the Pharisees as having (Mt.23:2-4). He knows that He will shortly commission them as His

representatives on earth, baptize them with power and the Holy Spirit and release them into full-time ministry where they will be responsible for laying the doctrinal and practical foundations for the Messianic movement (church) whose emergence is just around the corner as recorded in the book of Acts. The apostles realize that the level of revelation that they currently walk in is insufficient to carry them through the long years that lay ahead. They realize that their inward vitality is connected to their ability to abide in Christ (Jn.15:6) and when that connectedness wanes so does the strength from which they are able to operate. This is the impetus for their inquiry into Jesus' prayer life.

WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?

It is one thing to understand why the apostles prayed, I mean they *needed* to pray with all of that going on, right? But what about us, what about me? Most of us are not leading a great revival somewhere or facing intense persecution or responsible for the doctrinal formation of a movement. For many of us, life seems pretty much the same yesterday as it did the day before and probably will tomorrow. But the necessity of prayer is never determined by how inspired we feel or for that matter how uninspired we may feel. Numerous times in the New Testament the apostles, including Paul, exhort the church to continue together in prayer (2 Eph.6:18; Col.4:3; 1 Tim.2:1; 2 Tim.2:22; Heb.13:15; Jude 20 etc.). Prayer was central to the life of the early church and it included praise, giving thanks and making intercession. Prayer isn't just what we do, it's who we are. We were made for communion with God and prayer is the chief agency by which we take the revelation of God and echo it back to Him in unceasing love. We don't pray just because there is a need, or a lack or a deficiency somewhere. We pray because it is our glory to exalt the majesty of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

COMMUNION IN PRAYER

Paul instructed the Ephesian congregations that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to search out the vast treasury of God's heart and reveal its glory to us! The Spirit *in* us lives to reveal God to us. *"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God."* (1 Cor.2:12). Therefore, we are to live in communion with the Spirit that we might have access to the eternal glories of His kingdom in this age. *"...walk according to the ... Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit."* (Rom.8:4-6). Communion involves setting our minds on the things of God. In this context the things of God are the unsearchable riches of His glory which He has prepared for us to experience. How does one access eternal glory in this age? This is precisely the question that Paul is answering. We have access to eternal realities by walking in communion with the Holy Spirit right now. We fill our minds with the truth of his word and we ask the Spirit to reveal that truth to our hearts. This is the fundamental reality of prayer; walking with and talking to God

about who He is, what He is thinking and what He has planned for both Heaven and Earth. We have been given access to the mind of Christ that we might know His Holy thoughts (1 Cor.2:16) and He has released His very life within us that we might be filled with the fullness of His glory.

RELEASING GOD'S POWER IN PRAYER

God has knit the release of His power to the ministry of intercession. We know that God releases power when we act, speak and believe in obedience to his word but many of us never stop to realize that speaking God's word involves more than preaching or teaching. Speaking God's words *to Him* is the foundation of prayer. Genesis 1 gives us the record of the created order being brought forth at the release of God's word (cf.Ps.33:6; Heb.11:3). Heb.1:2 declares that God made the worlds through Christ, who, John tells us, *is* the word of God and *was* the word at the beginning (Jn.1:3). Heb.1:3 affirms to us that Jesus is the agency through whom God made the world. And Heb.1:2 informs us that it is still the words of Jesus that are upholding and sustaining, in the present tense, all of creation. In the beginning Jesus spoke forth the will of the Father and as those words were uttered (Gen.1:3,4,6-7,9,11,14-19,20-21,24,26-27) God brought forth creation into time and space. Jesus is still an intercessor (Heb.7:25) and as He speaks the will of the Father, God releases the power of the Holy Spirit which sustains every created thing. As fascinating as that reality is however, it is not limited to Christ alone. Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you." (Mt.7:7). "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." (Jn.14:13).

PRAYING GOD'S WILL

Many have struggled to understand the fundamental nature of prayer in light of the above verses. Ask and it will be given to you seems so straightforward and yet it does not always seem to work that way. And *whatever you ask you will receive* seems to give license to abuses in the name of greed and self-centeredness. We cannot manipulate God into answering prayer as Isaiah's generation sought to do (Is.58:1-3). Simply put, God answers prayer because He chooses to. He is not a magic box that we rub in intercession as we seek to get our wishes granted. No, He is looking for partnership. God desires to walk in fellowship with humanity and we are called to walk in agreement with Him. Jesus said that we are to ask *in His name*. This is not to suggest that as we tack on "*In Jesus name, amen.*" to the end of our prayer He is going to answer them. To ask in Jesus' name implies that one is doing His will by serving as His ambassador. Therefore, doing God's will is directly related to walking in answered prayer. Jesus is promising that God will respond to our requests as our requests are in agreement with His will. "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding..." -Col.1:9

PRAYING GOD'S WORDS

Praying God's will so often looks like praying God's words. Christ as God's word (Jn.1:1-2) was the exact representation of God's heart, or as the book of Hebrews says, the express image of His person (cf.Jn.14:9). We see in the person of Christ the perfect marriage of God's word and God's will (Jn.5:19, 8:28). God has revealed His will through His written word. Learning to understand and apply the scripture equips us in knowing and discerning the will of God. For instance, the scriptures declare that God desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim.2:4). Also, He is not willing that any should perish but that all would come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). This then is what we pray in intercession. We do not need to overcomplicate it. We simply pray for a revelation of God's heart that brings men to repentance that they may be saved.

We can also pray using the impressions that God whispers to our hearts. Sometimes God speaks through dreams or encounters with His presence (Num.12:6). Though we consider these encounters as subjective we are not to despise prophecy. We must learn how to discern God's voice in the midst of prophetic encounters (Phil.1:9-10). Consider these passages (1 Ki.19:11-13; 1 Cor.14:29). God will not speak in a prophetic experience contrary to what he has revealed in His written word. Therefore, as God gives an impression to us we can compare it to His written word and then pray it in intercession. As an example, one may have a dream that one's family members are in a dark room but a man comes in with a lamp and begins to comfort them. We pray, asking God to shine the light of truth to unbelieving family members and to minister comfort and healing to them.

Another way that we agree with God in prayer is through making declarations. Speaking forth the truth of God's word establishes those truths in our hearts and releases our intention that God would produce fruit in those particular arenas. For instance, we may take a bold stand in prayer and say, *"God, for the fame of your Son, I declare that my city will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea!"* (Hab.2:14). In this way we agree with God's prophetic heart (and written word) for our city by declaring His truth over it. Another powerful way that decrees impact us is by speaking them over our own life. Many times as we read the scripture, God is whispering truths to us. We take those little whispers and speak them back to Him. *"God, you are for me."* (Ps.118:7). *"God, you do greatly desire me."* (Song.7:10). As we verbalize these truths we are choosing to believe that they are in fact true *for us*. This allows God to begin to establish those realities within us. As we believe these things we will walk in the power of them. As we believe that our cities will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory we will pray that way. As we pray that way God will open a door for his glory to be released that way. Our words to God matter and have tremendous impact as God's anoints them and answers them.

THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER

Another critical facet of prayer is that of the *ministry* of prayer. We mentioned earlier that prayer is functional, in other words, prayer get things done in the kingdom. But it is not firstly functional. The highest priority of prayer is not realized in its impact on earthly affairs but in its reflection of the worth and glory of the uncreated godhead. The Bible sets forth prayer first as a ministry to God. The book of Exodus begins the chronicle of Israel's priesthood by establishing a particular and representative people whose vocation was to serve, or to minister to God (Ex.28:1,3,4). In fact, in Ex.19:6 God declares that the entire nation of Israel was to be a kingdom of priests unto Him. Peter carries this priestly identity forward and applies it to the New Testament church. *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people."* -1 Pt.2:9. We understand according to the Gospels that Jesus' powerfully declared that the kingdom of God had broken in in a new way on the earth. Through Jesus, humanity now had access to the Father Himself. The king had come bringing His kingdom with Him and those that belong to Him are now priests within that kingdom. Therefore, we as a priesthood are called to minister to God as our chief calling. Sometimes people debate whether this can be true in light of the great commission. Someone might say, "Yes, but aren't we called to minister to people?" And of course, they would be right. We indeed are called to minister to people. But as Jesus said, *"Apart from Me you can do nothing."* (Jn.15:5). Our impact in ministry to people is directly related to our connectedness to The Vine, Jesus. A priest ministers out of the revelation that accompanies access to God, as in the case of the Old Testament priests (Lev.10:8-11). And so it is with us. We are only as effective in ministry as we are connected to His Majesty. Consider what the apostle Paul taught to the Corinthian congregations, *"Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."* -2 Cor.3:17-18. The ministry of beholding God was overtly priestly. The general populace of Israel never had access to God's presence. What they knew about God came from what they heard or saw from a distance, or in certain generations the miracles that they witnessed firsthand (Ps.103:7). But Paul, using priestly imagery here, teaches that the veil that separated God's glory from the direct gaze of the people, has now been removed in Christ so that we all, as priests, may behold the very revelation of God by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in order that we may become like His glorious image. And into what image are we formed? We are being formed into the express image of a priest upon His throne (Zech.6:13). Jesus is more than a King who prays, he is a Priest who rules. And as a priest He is our mediator before God. As the letter to the Hebrews states, *"He always lives to make intercession."* -Heb.7:15. As we can see, our glorious King Jesus is a priest who lives to minister to His God and Father in prayer and the ministry of the Spirit invites us to engage in this incredible call to walk in the liberty of God as a priesthood consecrated to Him by His very own presence.