

## "The Church At Prayer"

Some years ago I went with some people on our church staff to a leadership conference at the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. Adam Hamilton is the lead pastor there, and it's one of the largest United Methodist Churches in the world. There were hundreds of people at that conference from all over the country. During the course of the event Adam mentioned that prior to our coming, someone from their church had prayed over every seat, prayed for the person who would sit there, and that God's Spirit would touch that individual. He also described an outreach to an inner city school district experiencing many problems, where the names of each teacher in that district had been given to someone in their church, to pray for that teacher regularly. The local TV station was so impressed with what they were doing that they featured a special news report on what was happening. I was deeply moved by this church's commitment to prayer!

Having a church bathe its life and ministry in prayer is very Biblical! Let's take a look at the New Testament Church – those first Christians – and check out what they did in regards to prayer. We'll look at the Book of Acts, which tells the story of those first days of the Church, following Jesus' ascension back to heaven.

Acts 1:14: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." Before Jesus ascended back to the heaven He told His followers to wait for the Spirit to be sent to them before they took the message about Jesus to the world. So, they are waiting, and praying. Notice, they didn't just slip in a prayer here and there. They *constantly devoted* themselves to prayer!

Acts 2:41-42: "So those who welcomes his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Following Peter's preaching after the Spirit came at Pentecost, these new Christians met together regularly, and among other things, they *devoted* themselves to prayer.

Acts 3:1: "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon." Peter and John were key leaders in the Church. They would go to the temple to pray. This verse introduces the account of the miraculous healing of a man lame from birth.

Acts 4:23-24: "After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God...". Peter and John get into hot water with the religious authorities because they're preaching about Jesus and His resurrection. They're arrested, and warned to stop preaching. When they're released they go back to their friends. They all pray for boldness, and the Holy Spirit comes again in power!

Acts 6:1-4: "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the

daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.'" As the number of believers grows, Greek-speaking believers complain that their widows are being neglected by the Hebrews in the daily distribution of food. The 12 apostles call all of the disciples together to try to resolve the issue. They say that it's not right that their time is taken up waiting on tables – they need to *devote* themselves to the Word and *prayer*. So they appoint worthy leaders to mind the tables, and *pray for them* as they are set apart for this practical ministry.

Acts 7:59-60: "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" As Stephen is being martyred, the last thing he does is pray for those who are murdering him!

Acts 8:14-17: "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." Peter and John pray for new converts to receive the Holy Spirit.

Acts 9:10-12: "Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'" Saul is converted. God connects a Christian leader named Ananias to Saul through prayer, and a vision.

Acts 9:40: "Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up." Peter prays over a beloved disciple named Tabitha, or Dorcas, who has died, and she comes back to life again!

Acts 10:1-3: "In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.'" A God-fearing Roman soldier named Cornelius, who prays regularly, is praying, and receives a vision from God.

Acts 10:9: "About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray." Simon Peter is praying the next day, and he's given a vision that involves Cornelius. God arranges them to meet, and the end result is that for the first time, the Holy Spirit falls on *non-Jewish* people!

Acts 12:5: "While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him." Peter is in prison for preaching Christ. The Church gathers to pray *fervently* for him. Miraculously, the prison doors open!

And so on. And so on. This is just the first 12 chapters of the Book of Acts. There are 16 more chapters!

*Do you get the sense that prayer was a pretty important part of the church's activity in those early days? Yeah! I would say so!*

***Certain things happened because those first Christians took prayer seriously!***

*Prayer set the stage for the Holy Spirit and His power to come on those believers.* Sometimes we can be busy with church activity, but the Holy Spirit is not much of a part of it. The Spirit's presence and power is not felt or experienced. Even in our *worship services* the movement of God's Spirit is not sensed. Prayer is the channel through which God pours out His Spirit on His people!

*Praying together got the Church through difficult times.* Believers in the first century Church faced a lot of persecution. We saw that in some of the Scriptures that we read. Instinctively, they got on their knees and prayed as they faced opposition in the early church. In the U.S. today there is increasing hostility towards the church and Christians. Many churches are struggling, and finding it more difficult to operate in a culture becoming more secularized. These are tough times, and prayer can be one of the tools we can access that will help get us through!

*It was through prayer that the early Church experienced God's guidance.* A number of times in the Book of Acts it says how someone in the Church was given a vision of some specific thing God wanted them to do, or this guidance came about as a result of intense, heartfelt prayer! This is a crucial time for our congregation. I believe God has plans for us! God has a path He wants us to take. He wants to reveal that to us, and He will, if we commit to praying for His guidance in a serious manner!

*It was through prayer that the New Testament Church was energized!* Some years ago while I was recovering from major surgery I read through the Book of Acts, from *The Message*, which is a colorful paraphrase of the Bible. As I read from the Book of Acts once again I noticed how topsy-turvy and rambunctious things were in the early Church. The apostles and church leaders were always getting into trouble with the religious authorities, people were getting saved, extraordinary healings were taking place – church life was anything but dull! Was that because everyone in the New Testament Church was a super-hero type person? Hardly! These were ordinary people – fishermen, tax collectors, carpenters – ordinary people energized and electrified by an extra-ordinary God! Sometimes you look at a church, and people just seem tired and worn out and defeated, or they just function in a dull routine. When we commit to serious praying the Holy Spirit can bring new energy to a congregation – a new sense of joy and hope in the Lord!

*When the church is devoted to prayer, miracles can happen!* "Signs and wonders" are popping up all over the place in the Book of Acts! Sick people are healed. Sick people long even just to get under Peter's shadow. Aprons and handkerchiefs that touch Paul are brought to the sick and they're healed! How many congregations today are places where miracles are happening? Very often we don't feel the need for much prayer in the church because we're not doing anything we can't do in our own strength and power!

*It was through devoted prayer that God enabled the Church to reach the lost!* So much of the prayer emphasis in the early Church was aimed at reaching the lost with the message of salvation in Christ! People were converted and saved because God's people prayed! Today, we don't have the power to make people see their need for Christ and salvation. We can't convict people of their sins and their need for a Savior. Only God's Spirit can do that! And God's Spirit acts in response to *prayer*.

Okay, hopefully we've seen that when the Church, the Body of Christ, gathered together, *they prayed* – earnestly, regularly! Individual prayer is important – our private praying. But prayer within the Church body is also vital! Earnest, devoted prayer – to saturate our congregational life and activity with prayer!

***What are some of the ways we can saturate all we do in the Church with persistent, devoted prayer?***

*Prayer vigil.* I thank everyone who participated in our recent prayer vigil. Setting aside a chunk of a day for us to have continual prayer before the Lord!

*Praying over empty seats!* I already mentioned how those in the Church of the Resurrection prayed over each seat that would be occupied by those attending the convocation. We could pray over the seats in our adult Sunday School class, over the pews in the church, praying for those who would be sitting in those places.

*Pray over the membership roll.* My friend and pastor Rocky Riedel related how he went through the church membership roll and prayed for each person. The pastor can do that. Anyone of us could take the church directory and pray for each person by name.

*Redesign how we pray at our church meetings.* Often we have a short prayer to open or close a meeting. These prayers can easily become routine. We could take more time to *really pray* during our meetings. I often suggest sentence prayers as a way of encouraging more people to pray out loud, and not be so intimidated by praying.

*Pray before the worship service.* In a few churches I have been blessed to have someone willing to take the lead in inviting people to gather for prayer before the worship time begins. Unfortunately, often this person and I have been the only ones to participate in that prayer time. In one church I had a lady that offered to pray *during* the service (we had 3 services then, and she would pray in one of the services she didn't attend). She invited others to join her, but no

one did. What a spiritual boost it would be to know some people are praying behind the scenes while you are gathered to worship!

*Prayer walk through the neighborhood around the church.* What a powerful thing to have believers walking through the neighborhood, aiming prayers at the homes and the people who live in those homes as they pass them.

These are just some of the ways that we can make this church more a church that takes prayer seriously.

Let me close with an awesome promise Jesus gave to the Church in this regard. Jesus said: "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:19-20).

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.  
Community United Methodist Church  
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