

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (6-3-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

The Prayer Life of the Early Church

Acts 1:14

Additional Bible Reading: Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4, 42; 4:23-31; 6:1-4; 12:1-5; 16:13-15

Introduction

After the Ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's walk, i.e. three quarters of a mile. They went to the upper room. They, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers, had a prayer meeting. **They all joined together constantly in prayer** (Acts 1:14). Their prayer was earnest, warm-hearted, and steadfast. They were of one mind, united, of one purpose. There is no better kind of prayer meeting – zeal and earnestness about it, all bound together.

We do not know if all prayed, but they were all behind those who did pray. In our terms, hearty 'amen's rang out from all corners of the room after each one prayed.

We are going to consider the place of prayer in the early church, noting the occasions on which they prayed. Making some comments in general about prayer meeting, we shall see that prayer is crucial in the life of any real church. The Railway Mission named their prayer room "The Power House". We can only be enriched by considering the place of prayer in the early church.

Occasions when the early church prayed

Firstly, the early church prayed when the people felt weak and leaderless and fearful. After the Lord's Ascension and before the coming of the Holy Spirit, they felt like a flock without a shepherd. The Lord's presence had been withdrawn, and they felt in danger from their Jewish enemies. They were like sheep huddled together in a storm or getting closer at the sound of a wolf. They gathered together for united prayer.

What better thing can a church do in dark hours? Pastorless, threatened with trouble, feeling spiritual weakness and impotence, feeling God has deserted them. How else should the church react then, instead of bewailing their lot and sitting down in utter depression – but get together and unitedly lift up their voices to the Lord. Spirits are revived when we get together and draw near to God. One of the first uses of the prayer meeting is to encourage God's discouraged people.

Secondly they prayed on the occasions where God's power was experienced. So on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out, they again were all together in one place. It is not reading too much into the text to suggest that they were praying. Then came the rushing of a mighty wind and tongues of fire fell on them. They were clothed with the power promised by Jesus. Common fishermen became messengers of heaven (Acts 2:1-4). Poor vacillating Peter became as bold as a lion. Fiery John who would have called down fire on the Samaritans was filled with love and compassion.

Prayer before a church service makes a very real difference to the service and to the preacher. The mysterious energy which comes from the third person of the Trinity is

obtained when God's people pray together. Then, very real blessing comes in work and witness. If we want growth – spiritual and numerical – we shall pray.

Thirdly throughout Acts we see that prayer was always a characteristic of those who have been converted to the Lord. One of the first things they practiced and were taught was to pray. So after Peter's sermon, when 3000 received the message and were baptised, they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer – public prayer at the Temple plus more informal meetings and their own devotions (Acts 2:42).

The threat of persecution also brought the early church to its knees in prayer. When Peter and John were in prison, and then released, they went back to their own people and called a prayer meeting. **After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly** (Acts 4:31). When the church is in trouble, or when individual members are suffering, the answer is prayer. Persecution is not a pleasant experience, but it has its good side – it compels the church to pray. Men know more about God and prayer in persecution than in easier times. The mercy seat is a calm and sure retreat when every stormy wind blows.

The same thing happened when James was killed and when Peter was in prison. The church was earnestly praying for him (Acts 12:5), and that was the means of Peter's amazing deliverance. So when the church of God is at prayer, it is right to pray for individuals in danger and distress. And if it is the will of God, that prayer will be granted. Very important that we pray for one another, especially those in need and in difficulty.

The church also got together to pray when they needed guidance from God about what direction their future missionary and evangelistic work should go. **While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'** (Acts 13:2). We sometimes are guilty of sitting down and wondering what we should be doing or saying, and we discuss it among ourselves. But the first step ought to be to ask the Lord what He has planned and what His call is. This is the key to making right plans and choosing the right personnel and methods. As we wait on the head of the church, wisdom and direction are given. Ask Him directly and earnestly.

Finally, note that the first Christian service in Europe was a prayer meeting. Acts 16 tells of Paul and Luke crossing from Troas to Philippi – from Asia into Europe – and outside the city gate, by the riverside, women had gathered to pray. The Gospel was preached, Lydia's heart was opened to the Lord, she was converted, baptized, and went on to show Christian hospitality (Acts 16:11-15). So the prayer meeting was the first foothold of the Gospel in Europe. Maybe there is something we can learn here when we consider towns and villages throughout our land without Gospel witness. The first step ought to be to hold a prayer meeting.

We see, therefore, that prayer was dominant in the early church. In a variety of circumstances and different times, they resorted to prayer, and answers to prayer were given. When they were weak and leaderless, when there were new converts, when persecution came, when one of their number was in trouble, when evangelism was

being considered. It was the occasion when divine power was manifested, and it marked the beginning of Christian witness in Europe. So whether our need is physical or spiritual, the first thing to do is to seek the Lord's face.

Note too the example of the leaders in this matter. There were many calls on the Apostles' time. When the widows were neglected, they appointed seven men to look after this work, so that the Apostles could concentrate themselves on prayer and ministry of the word. The leadership set the example, and prayer was pre-eminent in their lives.

Spurgeon emphasised that preachers must pray as ordinary Christians, else they are being hypocritical. Indeed they need to pray even more than ordinary Christians, else they will be disqualified from their office. "If you become lax in secret devotion, not only will you need to be pitied, but your people also." Thomas Chalmers said, "Most failure in the ministry is not because of lack of visitation, study or organisation, but because of lack of prayer." We will never talk well to men for God till we learn to talk well to God for men.

The uses of a prayer meeting

We must think of the prayer meeting as the means whereby God's grace and power are given to a church, and the source of its growth. But even apart from the answers to prayer, it is valuable for Christians to pray together. As we pray together, we realize our oneness in Christ, and have an awareness of being in God's family. As we sing and pray together, we show our belonging together to the world and we become more aware and able to enjoy our Christian brotherhood.

We encourage one another in our devotion to the Lord as we pray together. We derive the fire from others when God gives them grace to pray. We get warmed up when we get near to one another in prayer. Several burning coals are placed together on the hearth, and then they blaze all the more brightly.

God has promised blessing in connection with united prayer. **I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them** (Matthew 18:19,20). There are blessings attached to individual prayer, and here we see there are also blessings attached to united prayer.

The prayer meeting ought to be very precious to us and valued by us. It is the source of all good blessing and progress in a church. It is in the spirit of prayer that our strength lies. There will never be any spiritual awakening apart from united prayer.

Hindrances to the prayer meeting

We receive a clear command and warm encouragement to pray. But how these can be spoiled by failure on the part of those who pray. What are the things that can hinder prayer?

Firstly, unholiness. If we walk contrary to God, we cannot expect answers from God. **If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened** (Psalm 66:18). Inconsistency in life means that prayer will not be answered.

Secondly, discord among believers. In 1 Peter 3:7, husbands are warned that having the wrong attitude towards their wives can hinder their prayers. In the same way, wrong relationships within the church can spoil its life of prayer.

Long prayers can be a hindrance in a prayer meeting. George Whitefield spoke of a man who prayed him into a good mood, and then went on to pray him out of it again! Spurgeon commented on men who pray on and on for long enough, and then ask the Lord to forgive their shortcomings!

People who use their prayers to preach a little sermon, to correct what the previous brother has said, or to get at someone else in the room, are abusing the prayer meeting. Someone once described such a horizontal prayer as “the finest prayer ever offered to a Boston audience”. D.L.Moody, at an Edinburgh prayer meeting, once interrupted, “While our brother finishes his prayer, the rest of us will sing hymn number...”.

The prayer meeting is also hindered by a lack of earnestness. One warm hearty prayer is worth a score of formal cold prayers which have no use at all. Much of our prayer is lost because we do not put our heart into it. We are honouring the Lord with our lips, but our heart can be far from Him. The things going on at home, or at work, our future plans can be more pressing on our minds.

We can also spoil a prayer meeting by the way we continue our lives after we leave it. For example, if we have prayed for someone to be converted, and then fail to speak to that person about salvation. Or if we have asked God to support a fellow Christian, and then never encourage or help them in any way. Or pray for financial support for the church, but never dip into our own pockets. Earnest prayer should be followed by persevering efforts. Then the result will be great indeed.

The great object of prayer meetings

The first object of our prayer meetings is the glory of God. Consider how much of the Lord’s Prayer is for God and His interests – His name, His kingdom, and His will. He takes the first place, not us. Our daily bread comes later. Our ultimate concern is to be God’s glory and honour. A woman may pray for her husband’s conversion, because that would make for a happier home, that would reduce tension, that would bring them closer together – but the number one reason ought to be to bring glory to God. **If anyone speaks... If anyone serves... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ** (1 Peter 4:11). The end of our prayer is not our comfort, pleasure or satisfaction, but that attention is given to Him and glory for Him.

Secondly, we pray together so that there will be blessing on the church. If we love one another, we shall pray for one another – for people who suffer bodily, for those with family problems, those who are sorrowful and fearful, for backsliders and those weak in their faith, for missionaries, leaders, the ministry of the Word, the unconverted, children, the conversion of the ungodly. These people ought to be a real burden on our

hearts. We feel full of sympathy for them, for they are dying without God, and dying without hope. They are living in their sins, and will die in their sins.

Only the Holy Spirit can bear on the hearts of these people. The preacher or the witness can only utter words. Spurgeon said, "I have as much hope of teaching a tiger the virtues of vegetarianism as try to convince unregenerate man the truth about sin, righteousness and judgement to come." Only the Holy Spirit can bring light and life.

Conclusion

At the church prayer meeting we encourage one another. It is the appointed way to receive blessing. Beware of the hindrances, and make the object of the meeting the glory of God, the blessing of the church, and the conversion of sinners.