

Whatever Happened to the Prayer Meeting?

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Samuel Chadwick, one of God's great men of past years, taught that Satan's greatest aim is to destroy our prayer lives. Satan is not afraid of prayerless study, prayerless work or prayerless religion - but he will tremble when we pray. If Chadwick was correct (and many other great men of God have said similar things), then we have a problem. If there is any part of our church life that seems to be in trouble, it is the prayer meeting. IN fact, in an increasing number of churches, for all practical purposes, there is no such meeting at all.

There is no lack of books on prayer, and most pastors preach on prayer every now and again. But if there is any doctrine to which we pay only lip service in our churches, it has to be the doctrine of prayer. I have ministered in thousands of churches over the past twenty-two years in Europe, North America and around the world and I have never ceased to be amazed at the neglect of true, heart-felt, corporate prayer. There are some beautiful exceptions, of course, but they are few by comparison. I sometimes wonder whether another challenge or message on prayer will do any good. The hour has come for us to pray. Let us put the prayer meeting back into the life of our churches.

Part of my motivation for writing this article came after a weekend of ministry in a church where the mid-week prayer meeting had been dropped, due manly to lack of interest and attendance. The Holy Spirit worked during that weekend, and in the final meeting on Sunday evening the pastor announced that they would start the prayer meeting again on the following Wednesday evening. Later, I heard that some fifty people had attended and that they had a great time of prayer. The fact that some churches do have good, lively, powerful prayer meetings even in this activistic, leisure-loving, television age is proof that your church can do so as well. But it will take action, discipline and perseverance, combined with large amounts of love, patience and spiritual reality.

Some Christians tell me that they have stopped going to dead, badly organized prayer meetings, while

others continue only from a sense of duty or guilt. Should we not be drawn into the presence of the living God with higher motivation than this? Why are we attracted only by special speakers and programs, rather than to the Lord himself? What real authority does the Lord Jesus have in our churches today? What authority does he have in your life and mine if we do not give top priority to meeting regularly with his people to pray?

The Need for Change

To see things change will take both a spiritual and practical revolution. We need a divine combination of practical change and deeper commitment. Pastors spend hours preparing for a sermon, but how much time is put into preparing for the prayer meeting? Linked with this is the great compromise of changing the prayer meeting to a mid-week service or 'prayer and Bible study' that involves only ten to twenty minutes of actual intercession after the bible study and prayer requests. I suppose some feel this is better than nothing, but many decide that 'nothing' is better and so they just don't attend.

Some really lively churches with which I have contact, have prayer and Bible study on separate nights in order to give enough time for both. Others have them together, but make the meeting long enough to include at least one hour of prayer. Some hold prayer meetings in various homes, which is good, although often on these occasions there is a tendency for there to be more fellowship than prayer. And when these groups do pray, they often seem to lack reality in the area of intercession.

These functions should not take the place of at least one good church prayer meeting each week at which a large part of the congregation meets. We should follow the example we find in Acts 1:14, 'They all joined together constantly in prayer.'

The lack and neglect of such meetings is, I believe, one of the greatest mistakes in our Bible-believing churches, and such deception by Satan represents a far greater enemy than liberal theology or the cults. In fact, a clear study of 2 Corinthians 10:4-7 would show us that prayer is the principal means through which we are going to stand against the enemy whatever way he might attack us. We seem to be blind to the nature of spiritual warfare and feel that as long as we have a full Sunday school and good numbers on Sunday morning then all is well. Could it be true that if the Holy Spirit left us, very few changes would be made? Would everything go on as usual?

We should be willing to do almost anything to keep from such a deadly state. It seems to be almost too late in some places, where spiritual schizophrenia has set in such a deep level. This will be changed only by radical, deep-rooted repentance. Surely the prayer meeting, and our personal prayer lives, must be of vital importance if anything lasting and real is to take place at the centre of church life. Let us put Christ back into his rightful place as, Lord of our own lives and of our church programmes.

Church Leaders Must Act

The responsibility for action rests with pastors and church leaders, with a need for the co-operation of every church member. It is vital that church leaders meet together for discussion and prayer on specific action they should take to make the prayer meeting a main event in their churches. Pastors need to realize

the importance of firm preaching and teaching on the biblical basis for prayer. They also need to point out some of the things to avoid in prayer meetings; praying too long at one time, preaching at others in our prayers, praying only for the needs of our own church, not changing anything from week to week, judging and looking down on people who pray differently or who lack ability in English or theology, and not really believing or expecting any answers. A lot of good books on prayer are now available and should be widely distributed among the congregation, along with other informative books such as Operation World. Church leaders should wait on God and prepare in a serious way so that each prayer meeting is carefully planned and fully used.

Conducting the Prayer Meeting

As far as the prayer meeting itself is concerned, how can we actively get out of the rut which often makes this the most boring, unpopular meeting of the week? I'd like to pass on a few suggestions used effectively for more than twenty years in our work. We have discovered that to vary the format of the meeting is extremely important, as the more accustomed we become to routines, the less vital it is to us. It can be varied by sometimes beginning with worship, intercession and thanksgiving; other times with a brief challenge to prayer. If ministry from the Word is given it should be short and yet powerful; individuals could also share specific answers to prayer.

Prayer must involve the mind as well as the heart, and long periods that do not require personal involvement allow the mind to drift. Therefore, it is good to break into groups so that each person is given the opportunity to participate. Each group could, for example, be given information about one area of need and be asked to concentrate their prayers on that.

We use films, videos and filmstrips whenever possible and applicable. Many mission groups have produced some very effective ones that are a good stimulus to prayer. When showing slides, you could even stop for a time of prayer after each half dozen or so.

When prayer requests are presented, it is best to keep them short. Long detailed accounts for prayer not only kill the spirit of the meeting, but they also often leave very little time for prayer. Items for prayer and praise could be written in advance and given out to people as they arrive, or they could be written on a blackboard. One of the best helps is an overhead projector, especially as outline maps of various countries could also be shown.

Delegate individuals in advance to give a brief update on a particular country. This could include statistics (for example, the population of the region, its religion, etc. — all easily obtained from the book Operation World), something of the missionary work being done there, as well as any current news regarding different situations within that country. If the church has several missionaries, then play short tapes containing up-to-date information about their present circumstances. It may also be a good idea for pastors to encourage people to 'adopt' a missionary family; to write to them regularly, and then to present briefly the needs of that family at the prayer meeting from time to time. It would be encouraging for both church members and the missionaries if mission fields could be visited now and again.

Urge different people to pray. Help them to feel relaxed in terms of grammar, theological content or length. Especially encourage those who don't pray very often or not at all - but don't embarrass anyone. There must be a balance between the Holy Spirit's spontaneous work and each person's helping to make

the prayer meeting what it should be. Be patient and reject discouragement — people will not learn reality in prayer overnight. In order to encourage people to become more world-wide in their vision, it is good to make use of a world map and other helpful items (like the set of prayer cards available from the address below).

Where and When

Where and how often should group prayer meetings be held? In addition to the weekly prayer meeting at the church, I strongly advise that the meeting be held periodically in homes. This opens doors of ministry through hospitality and avoids the pitfalls of isolating prayer from fellowship and basic spiritual growth. Around the world God is working in home meetings, and a church is foolish if it totally fails to make use of this opportunity in some way. How sad, on the other hand, to see many home groups having no real interest in praying for anything outside their own particular needs.

I believe there should be spontaneous early morning prayer meetings and days set aside for prayer, often far into the night. I believe this is one of the main factors in the victories we see around the world, both on our two ocean-going ships, and through our teams operating in more than twenty-five countries. During such extended times of prayer people must be made to feel free to leave when they want to. They must realize that they are not in a spiritual marathon. However, the more information they have about the world's needs, the more responsibility they will feel to pray for those needs to be met. And prayer takes times!

Remember we are in a spiritual warfare. Prayer is one of our main weapons and faith is closely linked with it. We must not expect it to be easy. Satan will counter-attack any efforts made towards effective prayer. We must refuse any form of discouragement and press forward whatever the cost. Half the world has still not heard or read the gospel and what we do in prayer, in God's sovereignty and mercy, will be a deciding factor as to whether or not they will. Let us ask God for new ideas and initiatives in order to be creative in the task that he has given us. And let us be disciplined in playing our personal part.

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