

## "A Praying Congregation"

The Book of Acts gives us a glimpse of what it was like in the first years of the Church - the Church of the first century (the New Testament period). How did they spend time when they met together? What was important to them?

One important facet of their life together was *prayer* - they regularly gathered to pray! Acts 2:42 says, "And they *devoted* themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and *the prayers*...". Notice: they "devoted" themselves to this!

Churches have a whole host of different activities. But I believe *praying together* is one of the most essential things we can be doing!

What difference can it make if we are a praying congregation? Praying together has many values, but let's follow just two lines of thought today. ***First, in praying together, we can give each other mutual support and encouragement in our faith.*** Turn to Acts, chapter 4. God healed a lame man through Peter and John. As a result, these two disciples got into trouble with Jewish religious leaders because they did it in Jesus' name. They were put in prison. Later, they were released, but warned not to speak any more in Jesus' name. Notice what they did when they were let out of jail: "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..." (Acts 4:23-24a). It was a tense situation. They were in danger. *Instinctively* they went to their Christians friends and *prayed!*

Early in my ministry, I made a hospital call on an active church member, a believer. She was not doing well, and was deeply discouraged. I felt a heavy burden. I thought, "If only I could make a few phone calls, and quickly set in motion a network of people to pray for this person...", but at the time, there was no prayer chain, no organized prayer groups, in that church. It hit me: How important it is to be able to mobilize a team of people on a moment's notice to respond to a prayer need. Since then, I have appreciated when a church has that kind of ministry in place!

A man deserted his wife and 5 children. In desperation the lady got into a small group in a church. She reflected, "I felt there was nothing left to live for anymore...being a devout Catholic, I was a bit leery of the whole situation. Imagine my surprise when I found they weren't a group of gossipy women, but they cared enough to pray! The very first time I was given courage to feel that with God's help and theirs, I could make it. My strength has begun to come back, and when I pray there is always an *answer*. I still have problems, but thank God, I now have *praying friends*."

All of us have special things we long to share at times with other people: *good* things - *troublesome* things. What a great support it can be when we have a place to go where Christian friends can listen and share and pray us through good times and hard times! The pilot of a plane heard this exchange between an air traffic controller and another pilot. There was this rather frantic voice: "Pilot to tower...pilot to tower...I am 300 miles from land, and my fuel tanks are almost empty! Please instruct!" Then came this response: "Tower to pilot...tower to pilot...repeat after me: 'Our Father, who art in heaven...". Sometimes we just ***have to pray***.

We get down, we get defeated...we get desperate. What a gift to have a circle of Christian friends who know how to pray and will take time to pray! I first came to experience the blessing of a praying church in my college years. I would go to a Friday night prayer meeting at my home church, where if one had a prayer need, you would sit in the middle of a circle, and others would gather around, put their hands on your shoulder, and pray for you. I also began to meet once a week with 2 or 3 Christian friends my age. We would talk about what was going on in our lives, then pray for each other.

It was in the DNA of the early church for believers to regularly get together to pray so they could encourage and support each other in their walk with Christ. But another thing happened as the church described in Book of Acts prayed. ***It was through prayer that they received guidance and power for their mission to the world.***

For instance, right before the Risen Christ ascended back to heaven, He told His followers to go to Jerusalem and wait for His Spirit to be sent to them. Before they were allowed to share the news about Jesus with the world, they had to wait for God's direction and power! And what did they do as they waited? "All these were *constantly devoting themselves to prayer...*" (Acts 1:14).

That pattern of getting their marching orders from God through group prayer didn't stop there! Check out Acts 13:2-3: "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.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off." Notice the specific guidance they got through prayer!

Every organization, in order to be successful, has to have a sense of direction and purpose - a "mission" if you will. Successful organizations have leaders who have the ability to cast a vision for the future and get people to follow it. This holds true of the church, too. The church needs to have a sense of direction and purpose - what is the mission to which God is calling us? Who are we supposed to reach? And how? But if we are to do *God's work*, then we need *God to guide us!* We need to listen for God's marching orders. And we do that through *prayer!*

Stephen Brown wrote a book about ministry in the church. He tells how we are prone to think humans can run the church, and do the work of God, if we just have the right methods and correct programs. He says he once attended a meeting designed to plan the future for his denomination in his area and nobody, including himself, even suggested that they pray together!

The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. became known as one of the most creative and innovative churches today. Listen to this description of one phase of its early development under the leadership of Gordon Cosby. "The irrational decision sometimes, *when bathed in prayer*, has the wings of the Holy Spirit. The quickest illustration to come to mind (was) our decision to buy Dayspring farm. Buying Dayspring was an irrational decision by anybody's fiscal notebook. We couldn't have done a sillier thing than to buy Dayspring. We had just bought our building at 2025 Massachusetts Avenue. I think we had 15 or 20 members. Only half of them were employed in paying jobs. And we owed \$100,000 on this building. (This was back in the 1960's or 1970's).

"But the Spirit was moving within the members of this congregation...individual members began coming forward with checks, small but sacrificial, urging Cosby to begin the search for an out-of-town location for a prayer and retreat ministry. Against his better judgment, Cosby appointed a committee and they began searching for property.

"Now you know the farm they found, which we got for \$35,000 or \$37,000 for 180 acres in Montgomery County. We sat on the floor...and *prayed*. Then we unanimously voted to do that idiotic, irrational thing. We owed \$100,000. We did not have a clue as to how to finance our little church. We were in a brand new building. And we voted to spend \$37,000 for a retreat farm. Suppose we hadn't done it. We did pray. It was a decision bathed in prayer, beginning with the two people who gave checks. Within a year, the Atomic Energy Commission decided to relocate and to move to a site one mile from Dayspring. Before anyone set foot on our property, within a year it was worth \$500,000. Now much more. Had we waited until it made fiscal sense, would we ever have had Dayspring? Of course not."

Here was a church that got guidance from God as they spent time together in prayer! ***Believers in the Book of Acts not only got guidance in prayer for their mission to the world - that's where they got the power to carry it out also!***

Earlier today in Acts 4 we saw how Peter and John, after their release from prison, gained new courage and strength through praying with their Christian friends. But they also prayed for *power* to impact people around them - and to do mighty things in the name of Jesus. "And now Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:29-31).

In Acts 12 there is a story of how Peter is in prison for preaching the gospel. When this happened, what did the church do? You guessed it - *they prayed!* Acts 12:5 says, "While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him." Do you remember what happened? An angel of the Lord appeared in that jail. Peter was miraculously set free. And the jailer was converted to Christ as a result (perhaps others also)! You may remember years ago when a group of Americans were held as hostages in Iran. When they were finally released, one of the hostages was interviewed by Bryant Gumble on the morning news. Gumble asked: "To what do you attribute your release?" The former hostage answered: "The prayers of the saints." Gumble didn't get it. He asked again: "To what do you attribute your release?" Again, the man responded: "The prayers of the saints."

***Spending time in our church schedule to pray is a way to tap into God's power so we can get the gospel into the world and impact those outside the church for Christ.*** One year in a church I was pastoring we were having a rough time. Things were not going well. In the Fall, we decided to set aside a week during which we encouraged people to fast and pray - for the church, for our community, for the lost, etc. You know, after that, God moved in startling ways to touch

and change that church and our situation.

I talked with the pastor of a church that had turned around from a dying congregation to a vibrant church, impacting their community. I asked how they did it. The pastor said that they made some changes in their worship style, and in their attitude towards those outside of the church. But they undergirded all their efforts with prayer. In fact, while the worship services was going on, they had people elsewhere in the building, praying. He reiterated that prayer in that church was an essential part of their beginning to make a difference in the lives of those outside the church.

In some of the churches I've served, there has been one person, or perhaps several, who've had a passion for prayer - in a sense, they became my "prayer conscience". There was one lady who worked hard to have people praying during the worship services. Another lady . kept pushing for groups to pray. In one church, a man came up to me and asked if would be ok if he invited people to gather to pray right before the service started. I was thrilled, and said, "Of course!" Now to be honest, unfortunately, in most of these cases, there was not a great response. Few people in the congregation seemed interested.

***Congregational prayer...tapping into the power of God for our mission to the world!*** The setting is Leipzig, East Germany. There is a huge crowd in the streets. A banner hangs over the crowd with the words, "Wirdanken dir Kirche". **"We thank you, church"**. What church? And why were they thanking the church? The church was Nicholai Church, a large, old cathedral in the heart of Leipzig, East Germany. Years before, a group of people began a Monday night prayer service to pray for their nation, for freedom from Communism, for peace. Monday night after Monday night, year after year, they prayed together, drawing spiritual strength for the struggle.

It's now 1989. The police begin to take notice of the prayer services, and on September 4th, as they were leaving church, the pastor and a group of people are attacked by police. But the pastor begins teaching principles of nonviolent resistance. And the group continues to grow. They become known as "The New Form", which will later become the opposition party. On September 25th, 6,000 people pack the cathedral, and on October 2nd, 20,000 people were waiting outside the door to join in the protest march. The rest is history, as the Berlin Wall comes down, and Communist country after Communist country collapses. Even though the mainstream news media pretty much ignored this part of the story, what happened in Leipzig was repeated over and over in churches in other Communist countries. When those courageous Christians prayed on Monday nights in Leipzig, who would have believed their prayers would change the course of world history?

***Can we challenge one another to take prayer more seriously in this church? How can we provide opportunities for us to pray more together?***

Through a prayer chain (we have one) Through prayer groups (groups that meet specifically to pray for others). I've been part of such groups. Through small groups - many churches have a

small group ministry, where prayer is a key component of every type of group. Through special times set aside for congregational prayer: prayer vigils of 12 or 24 hours of continuous prayer, or a week of prayer to start the New Year. I've done that several times - where we've cancelled other church activities that week, and pray together at the church, and privately in our homes.

We can make prayer a larger part of our existing committees and groups - instead of just starting or ending a meeting with a prayer, which is often routine and expected. Sometimes I think our attitude is that prayer is waste of time..."We're here to conduct business, not to spend time in prayer." *But prayer is the business of the church!*

I especially remember one Administrative Council meeting in a church I served. I had just learned that the chairperson, a fine young man with a family, was going to lose his job. Others on the Council were battling illness. I knew that members of that committee were hurting. We conducted our business, but there was no mention of the personal and family burdens the people brought to that meeting. I was asked to close with a prayer. Instead of just saying a prayer myself, as their pastor, I had the group get in a circle. We held hands. And I asked people to share anything they would like included in the prayer, and people did. We prayed for one another. And you know, the whole spirit and tone of that meeting changed! We felt warmth and we felt love within that group.

*That's just one of the beautiful and powerful things that can happen when we in the church take the time to pray together!*

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