

PLANNING AND LEADING AN EFFECTIVE PRAYER SERVICE

Introduction

The great Baptist minister of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon, attributed all of his success in ministry to the prayers of his people. During one of his church's prayer meetings, Spurgeon said the following:

"It fills my heart with gladness to see so many hundreds of persons gathered together at what is sometimes wickedly described as, 'only a prayer meeting.' It is good for us to draw nigh unto God in prayer, and specially good to make up a great congregation for such a purpose. We have attended little prayer meetings of four or five, and we have been glad to be there, for we had the promise of our Lord's presence; but our minds are grieved to see so little attention given to united prayer by many of our churches. We have longed to see great numbers of God's people coming up to pray, and now we enjoy this sight.... How could we expect a blessing if we were too idle to ask for it? How could we look for Pentecost if we never met with one accord, in one place, to wait upon the Lord? Brethren, we shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians."

Spurgeon wrote those words over a hundred and fifty years ago. They seem even more appropriate for our generation. The prayer meeting is a dying thing. Many churches have abandoned it, often times along with an understanding of the importance of prayer itself. It is not surprising then to find people like Robert and Mary Murphy of New Milford, Connecticut, who not long ago began a prayer meeting in their own back yard because their church didn't offer one, or anything else on Sunday evenings.

Have we not heard from others, or even thought to ourselves, "It's only a prayer meeting." What's the big deal? What good can it really accomplish? Why waste my time when there are so many other things I could be doing? Why go when I'm so tired from the week? Why make my kids suffer through that? And yet we are reminded of Spurgeon's words, "How could we expect a blessing if we were too idle to ask for it?" Not just asking as individuals, but as a church? All throughout the just the New Testament, God commands – not suggests, not hints at, not offers as a good idea, command us to pray. Consider a few –

1 Thess 5:17, "pray without ceasing,"

Jas 5:16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another,"

Eph 6:18, "[pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication."

Jude v. 20, "beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit."

Now, we need to be careful here. In our culture of rugged individualism, we tend to individualize these texts and make them about our personal prayers. And there is validity in doing that. But remember that all of these passages were originally written to churches, not individuals. The primary application of each of these passages reflects a command to pray

together as God's people. So, what can we do to effectively plan and lead powerful prayer gathering?

BEFORE THE SERVICE ITSELF

1. Design a Service for Kingdom Prayer

When I first came to the church I'm at now, the weekly prayer service was not a spiritually-oriented, well-ran time. There were some there who genuinely sought the Lord. But the majority of the time was used by the members to 'get caught up' and hear about how everyone inside and outside the church was doing. Sharing requests and chatting (sometimes even gossiping) for the first 20 or 30 minutes was how the service began. Then, most of the requests dealt with physical needs (health, jobs, working cars, etc). The time actually spent in prayer was sometimes less than the sharing of requests.

Let me say from the outset, *there is nothing wrong with praying for physical needs*. I think Jesus himself gives us warrant for such things by telling us to pray 'give us this day our daily bread' (Matt 6:11). However, when we come together as the body of Christ, our focus should be somewhere else. It is important to learn that there is a difference between our personal prayer closet and our times of gathered prayer. During times of gathered prayer, our focus should be more on the spiritual needs of the church and those we know. We should focus on praying with a kingdom focus.

People are used to thinking about prayer as a means to get their personal needs met. However we should understand prayer as a means to praise and adore God, to know Him, to come into his presence, and be changed by Him. We need to better learn how to pray, repent and petition God as a people. Biblically and historically, the one non-negotiable, universal ingredient in times of spiritual renewal is corporate, prevailing, intensive and kingdom-centered prayer. So then what does that kind of prayer look like?

1.1. Kingdom Prayer is focused on God's presence and kingdom

In a message on prayer, Tim Keller explained that Jack Miller talked about the difference between "maintenance prayer" and "frontline" prayer meetings. Maintenance prayer meetings are short, mechanical, and totally focused on physical needs inside the church. But frontline prayer has three basic traits: 1) a request for grace to confess sins and humble ourselves; 2) a compassion and zeal for the flourishing of the church; 3) a yearning to know God, to see his face, to see his glory. Read over the biblical prayers for revival in places like Acts 4, Exodus 33, or Nehemiah 1, and these three elements are easy to see. Remember Acts 4? Acts 4 is particularly telling. After being threatened for preaching Christ, the apostles were released by the authorities. They returned to the church where they prayed together. What did they pray for? Did they ask for protection for themselves and their families? No, they only asked for only boldness to keep preaching! This is kingdom-centered prayer.

1.2. Kingdom Prayer is bold and specific

The characteristics of this kind of prayer involves pacesetters in prayer spend time in self-examination. Without a strong understanding of grace, this can be morbid and depressing. But in the context of the gospel, it is purifying and strengthening. They “take off their ornaments” as the people did in Exodus 33. They examine themselves for idols and set them aside. They then begin to make the big request—a sight of the glory of God. That includes asking: 1) for a personal experience of the glory/presence of God (“that I may know you” — Exod. 33:13); 2) for the people’s experience of the glory of God (v. 15); and 3) that the world might see the glory of God through his people (v. 16). Moses asks that God’s presence would be obvious to all: “What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” This is a prayer that the world be awed and amazed by a show of God’s power and radiance in the church, that it would become truly the new humanity that is a sign of the future kingdom.

1.3. Kingdom Prayer is prevailing and corporate

By this we mean simply that prayer should be constant, not sporadic and brief. Why? Are we to think that God wants to see us grovel? Why do we not simply put our request in and wait? But sporadic, brief prayer shows a lack of dependence, a self-sufficiency, and thus we have not built an altar that God can honor with his fire. We must pray without ceasing, pray long, pray hard, and we will find that the very process is bringing about that which we are asking for—to have our hard hearts melted, to tear down barriers, to have the glory of God break through.

This kind of prayer must be planned. It’s not something that will always rise up from our hearts the way it should. So, plan out a service that highlights these elements. This doesn’t mean teaching through these things each. It simple means putting together an outline or Scripture references that lead people to pray this way.

2. Prepare Yourself Spiritually

This goes for both the one leading the prayer service, and those that will be attending. The one leading should have already spent time with God in prayer. He or she should have dealt with any sin in their life, and be fully ready to follow the Spirit’s empowering presence. Again, this also applies to those attending.

Back in the nineteenth century, a pastor named John Todd wrote a book entitled, Hints and Thoughts for Christians. One of the chapters in that book was entitled, “How to Make a Prayer Meeting Dull.” With stinging insight and sarcasm, he says, in effect, if you want to make a prayer meeting dull, one should follow these suggestions:

“Suppose the meeting is tonight. Don’t pray about it. Try to find some excuse for staying away. Are you not very tired? Aren’t you coming down with a cold? If you do go, arrive late. Feel no responsibility to pray. If you do pray, see how long you can be. The world is full of things that need prayer. Bring them all in. Or else, use your prayer time to scold those who are present. Then, after the meeting, criticize in the presence of your family, those who prayed.”

Thankfully, pastor Todd can not only bring conviction, but also encouragement. To make the prayer meeting more interesting, he says:

“Let the prayer meeting live in your hearts. Consider a Scripture [passage] or a thought or two that can be profitably offered up in prayer. Pray for the meeting in your family worship. Pray that Christ will be manifested in the meeting. Pray that the Holy Spirit may be present to warm, cheer, and animate every heart. Feel responsible for it. Make it a solemn duty, a habit, and a privileged to be there. Above all, pray at the meeting. Participate . . . Be hopeful and expectant; believe Christ when he promises to be in the midst of [those] gathered in his name.”

E. M. Bounds says, “The life, the power, and the glory of the church is prayer.... Without it, the church is lifeless and powerless.” The one leading the prayer service should not only prepare themselves, but help others to be prepared as well.

DURING THE SERVICE ITSELF

1. Begin with Scripture and Prayer

Find some passage of Scripture that will help set the tone for the service. Some will say you shouldn’t offer an explanation; you should provide any devotional teaching over the passage. While I don’t think you have to begin with a sermon, I do think there is value in an explanation of the passage. This ensures that everyone is on the same page, and can clearly see how the text focuses the evening’s prayer time. Likewise, you may allow different parts of Scripture guide you throughout the time. If you have 3 or 4 specific themes to pray over, pick a passage of Scripture that would help serve as an introduction to and help focus the time of prayer.

Furthermore, we should begin with prayer. Pray for the prayer gathering. Ask the Lord to come in power. Ask God to give us confidence in Christ to come before him in prayer. Ask God to send his Spirit to shape the attitudes of those there, to guide the service.

2. Vary the Tone and Pace of the Service with Music

If it’s possible, break up the service with music. Either transition, or lead into different kinds of praying with appropriate music. Find a hymnal that has the psalms for some excellent options.

This can be done with or without live musical accompaniment. If you don't have musicians available, make sure you choose music familiar to those at the gathering.

3. Vary the Kinds of Prayer Offered

Sometimes it will be appropriate to focus on a certain kind of praying, such as in a solemn assembly service when the focus is on confession and repentance of sin (cf. Joel 2:12-17). But for the regular weekly gathering, you will want to pray various kinds of prayer. Follows the example given by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, or pray through a Psalm or one of Paul's prayers. The simplest way to remember how to keep balance is to remember the simple acrostic ACTS.

3.1. Adoration

Adoration is simply praising God. Giving him glory for who he is and what he has done. This can be difficult for many people because we default to asking so easily. Adoration in prayer is a good discipline to cultivate. Many of the prayers of the Bible spend a lot of time in adoration and praise.

3.2. Confession

Both individual and corporate times are appropriate. Sometimes having a time for people to go to one another and ask forgiveness is good. Jesus taught this as well as his half-brother James.

3.3. Thanksgiving

Similar to praise, but focused on gratefulness. We are to live in a spirit of thankfulness. It cultivates humility and dependence.

3.4. Supplication

Supplication involves two kinds of praying: intercession and petition. The first is praying for others. In praying, it is easy to make two errors. One is to too often focus on yourself, not others. Make an effort to pray for others, even in corporate prayer. Petition is praying for yourself, or your group. One error is to always pray for others and never yourself. It's very important for the church to pray for itself. They know needs the best and can be a tremendous source of encouragement.

4. Vary the Way in which People Can Pray

We have often heard it said that “Variety is the spice of life.” This is true. Most people will have a hard time spending forty-five minutes to an hour in prayer, especially if the kind of praying is the same thing. Heads bowed, eyes closed for that long can easily be snoring before too long. Mixing it up keeps things moving, and helps people stay focused on praying. Here are some different methods of praying:

4.1. Open prayer

This is probably the most common variety of gathered prayer. Simply let anyone who wants to pray, pray. It is often helpful to give some direction here. Even saying something as simple as ‘Let’s enter a time of praise; not asking God for things, simply giving adoration for his name and works.’ This keeps from an ‘around the world’ time of praying.

4.2. Silent prayer

As its name implies, this is a time when people pray silently. This can be done with complete silence. Or, this can be done with a piano or some other instrument playing softly in the background. This kind of prayer is especially good during a time of individual confession. One word of caution, allowing this kind of prayer to go on too long and people may begin to doze or have wandering minds.

4.3. Small group praying

Small groups allow for people to pray in a more intimate setting. This can be helpful for uniting a congregation in prayer. I like to keep the groups around three or four people. With two, it becomes a temptation to spend time sharing but not praying. More than 4 and it makes it difficult for everyone to pray in the allotted time.

4.4. Concert prayer

I learned this from my Korean friend in seminary. We used to get up early to read the Bible and pray together (He insisted that we get up and meet “Early! We must get up early!”—good advice from a godly man). Since then, I’ve read that this was likely how the early church prayed as well. During concerts of prayer, everyone is praying together out loud. This can be distracting for some. But encourage them to keep at it. If you try something different and it flops or does not go well the first time, keep trying. Change is often difficult.

4.5. Leader prayer

Ask for one or more people to lead in prayer on a given subject. One caveat, though: make sure you have an idea that they will be able to, or want to lead in prayer. If you're unsure, do not ask individuals, ask for volunteers.

5. End on an Encouraging Note

This can be testimonies of answered prayer or an upbeat song. It helps people go out with excitement, desiring to come back, feeling confident to go to God in prayer on their own and with their church.

A Final Word

None of these things are fool-proof. You cannot make someone desire God or communion with him in corporate prayer. But these things might help craft a service that is both conducive for effective prayer and encouraging to God's people. Moreover, this is not the final word on prayer or prayer meetings. Mine Scripture for other ideas and suggestions.