

The Importance of Prayer in the Progress of the Church

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I. Introduction

Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18 that He would build His church. For nearly two millennia, He has been doing so through two primary building blocks, prayer and the ministry of His Word. That prayer is one of the primary building blocks of the church has been true from the very beginning, as seen by an examination of the book of Acts.

II. The Importance of Prayer in the Progress of the Early Church

The book of Acts is the story of how the church progressed through the power of the Spirit and the proclamation of God's Word in spite of persecution and problems. The early church grew steadily, at times spectacularly. What was the underlying secret to its success? It was prayer.¹ Notice the following progress-producing praying in the book of Acts:

A. Acts 1:14

After receiving the Great Commission (1:8) and witnessing the Ascension (1:9-11), the apostles (at the time eleven in number) obeyed Christ's command to return to Jerusalem to await the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). Upon their return to Jerusalem, they took up temporary residence in an upper room, joined by Jesus' mother and brothers, His female followers, and approximately one hundred other disciples (about 120 in all, 1:15). For a period of ten days, they "with one accord [one purpose, mind, or passion²] were devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14). For what did they pray with one accord, purpose, mind, or passion? One can only assume that it was for the bestowal of the Spirit (perhaps following the example of Christ, Luke 3:21-22) and the accomplishment of the mission through the bestowed Spirit's empowering (Luke 24:47-49 and Acts 1:8), a prayer God powerfully answered on the Day of Pentecost (2:1f) and subsequently throughout the book of Acts.

¹"Luke includes prayer at critical moments in his history of the church; this reveals that he and the early church considered prayer to have been an important means by which God sovereignly guided His people in the church's expansion. *The course of the church is shaped by God through prayer* (Gerald Priest; emphasis his). Stewart Custer, on page 9 of his commentary on Acts, entitled *Witness to Christ*, suggests that the following cycle continuously repeats itself in the book: prayer, power, proclamation, persecution, more prayer (note: I would add "progress" after "proclamation" in the cycle).

²Custer (p. 9) comments: "The English word *accord* is rather cool; the Greek word implies a passionate, fervent prayer together."

Application: Pray for the accomplishment of the mission. Be willing to be the answer to your prayer (Matthew 9:38).

B. Acts 1:24, et. al.

This passage is one of several in the book of Acts in which prayer plays an important part in the selecting and/or sending of leaders integral to the church's progress. In 1:24, prayer was made for discerning which of two men would best "take the place in this ministry and apostleship" (1:25). In answer to this prayer, Matthias replaced Judas Iscariot as the twelfth apostle and, thus, along with the other eleven, became part of the foundational leadership upon which Christ built His church (Ephesians 2:20).

Other passages in the book of Acts in which prayer plays an important part in the selecting and/or sending of leaders integral to the church's progress include 6:6, where the first deacons are selected; 13:3, where Paul and Barnabas are commissioned to take the gospel to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8); and 14:23, where Paul and Barnabas appoint elders to oversee the churches established on the first missionary journey.

Application: Pray that God would grant the wisdom to select leaders who will best help the church accomplish its mission. Pray that God would send more.

C. Acts 2:42

The progress of the church in Acts began with the three thousand who were saved, baptized, and became "charter members" of the local church of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (2:41). These believers, among other things, "devoted themselves to ... the prayers" (2:42). Such corporate prayer³ was undoubtedly a key component in the continued growth of this megachurch (2:47b).

³Note how corporate, rather than personal, prayer seems to be highlighted in Acts. "The hallmark of Western civilization has been rugged individualism. Because of our philosophy of life, we are used to the personal pronouns I and my and me. We have not been taught to think in terms of we and ours and us. Consequently we 'individualize' many references to corporate experience in the New Testament, thus often emphasizing personal prayer, personal Bible study, personal evangelism, and personal Christian maturity and growth. The facts are that more is said in the Book of Acts and the Epistles about corporate prayer, corporate learning of biblical truth, corporate evangelism, and corporate Christian maturity and growth than about the personal aspects of these Christian disciplines" (Gene Getz). Thus, when we speak of "the importance of prayer in the progress of the church," we primarily mean corporate prayer. "When God is about to do some great work, He usually lays it upon the heart of His people to pray for it. And while the sincere importunate prayer of a single saint gains entrance into the throne of the Almighty, the entreaties of many believers bombarding the gates of Heaven often prove more effective in accomplishing God's purposes" (Gerald Priest).

Application: Participate in every corporate prayer opportunity of your church you possibly can. Continue steadfastly in these.

D. Acts 3:1f

In this passage, Peter and John went to the temple to pray at 3 in the afternoon (3:1). When they arrived at the temple, they met and healed a lame man, which ultimately resulted in their arrest and imprisonment. After their release, the church “lifted their voices together to God” (4:24) and prayed, among other things: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to Your servants to continue to speak Your word with all boldness” (4:29), a prayer that God powerfully answered (4:31).

Application: Pray for boldness in proclaiming the gospel, both for yourself and for your fellow church members (cf. Ephesians 6:19-20).

E. Acts 6:4

Undoubtedly due to the progress of the church, a “good” problem developed, namely, the overlooking of the Hellenistic widows in the daily distribution of food (6:1). This distribution was apparently handled by the apostles (4:35). However, the rapid growth of the Jerusalem Church appears to have made this task too great for the apostles to manage in conjunction with their other responsibilities. Furthermore, the good was evidently becoming the enemy of the best, as this responsibility was threatening the apostles’ primary responsibility of giving themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word (6:2 and 4).⁴ Consequently, the apostles delegated this responsibility of “serving tables” (6:2) to seven (deacons), thus allowing them to give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, which resulted in the further progress of the church (6:7).

Application: Pray that your pastors would give themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of God’s Word. Be willing to shoulder more of the nuts and bolts of the ministry of your church, allowing them more time to do so.

F. Acts 7:59-60

In this passage, Stephen, as he was being martyred, prayed for his murderers, among whom was a young man named Saul/Paul (7:58; cf. 8:1

⁴“When interviewed for the pastorate of the Southside Gospel Tabernacle in Chicago, where he would spend 31 years of his life, [A. W. Tozer] explained that his work would require hours of study, prayer, and meditation each day. Though the conditions seemed unusual, the pulpit committee consented” (Mark Minnick, “Windows into Ministerial Prayer,” Frontline Pastor’s Insert, *Frontline*, July/Aug. 2004, p. 8). The rest is history.

and 22:20). The conversion of this young man a chapter later was an answer to his prayer⁵, perhaps the most significant progress-producing prayer in the book of Acts.

Application: Pray that God would turn opponents of the mission into proponents.

G. Acts 8:14-17

In this passage, the Jerusalem Church sends Peter and John to Samaria, who pray for the believers there to receive the Spirit, a prayer God answers, resulting in the further progress of the church from Jerusalem to Samaria (1:8).

Application: Pray for “home missions,” the progress of your church in its “Judea” and “Samaria” (Acts 1:8).

H. Acts 9:11

Here we have Saul/Paul praying. For what is he praying? One can only assume the same prayer he prayed at the moment of his conversion three days earlier: “What shall I do, Lord?” (22:10). God answers his prayer by sending Ananias with the answer. What God would have Saul/Paul to do was to take the gospel to the Gentiles (9:15; cf. 22:15 and 26:16-18, as well as 22:17-21), thereby progressing the church to the end of the earth (1:8).

Application: Pray, “What shall I do, Lord, in the accomplishment of the church’s mission?” Pray for “foreign missions,” the progress of the church to “the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

I. Acts 9:40-42, et. al.

This passage is one of many in Acts where, in answer to prayer (9:40a), a miracle is performed (9:40b-41), resulting in the progress of the church (9:42).

Other such passages in Acts include:

- 3:1f, where the healing of the lame man by Peter and John results in an opportunity for proclamation by Peter and the subsequent salvation of a myriad of men (4:4).
- 12:5 (cf. 12:12), where, following Peter’s arrest and imprisonment by Herod, “earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church,”

⁵Augustine once said that if Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul.

resulting in his miraculous release and, thus, his continued unconfined involvement in the progress of the church.

- 16:25, where, following their arrest, scourging, and imprisonment (all precipitated when Paul and Silas “were going to the place of prayer,” 16:16), Paul and Silas “were praying and singing hymns to God,” resulting in their miraculous release from the Philippian jail and, thus, their continued unconfined involvement in the progress of the church.

Application: Pray that God would work in such a way (including supernaturally) that your church would be able to continually accomplish the mission without hindrance.⁶

J. Acts 10:9f

In this passage, the prayers of Cornelius, an unbelieving, though devout, Gentile (10:2) are answered (10:4; cf. 10:30-31). Consequently, Peter, while himself praying (10:9; cf. 11:5), is summoned and sent to Cornelius to lead him and his household to Christ, a watershed moment in the progress of the church across the Jewish-Gentile divide.

Application: Pray for the progress of the church across ethnic and racial lines.

III. The Progress of the Church Through Prayer in Church History

What was so patently evident in the early church, namely, that prayer was the key to its progress, has been evident at various times throughout subsequent church history. D. Edmond Hiebert, on page 86 of his book entitled *Working With God Through Intercessory Prayer*, has written: “A study of the great spiritual movements in church history reveals that behind every such movement of revival stood an individual intercessor or a small band of faithful intercessors.” Following are just a few of the examples that testify to the truth of this thesis.

A. The Second Great Awakening

The Second Great Awakening (called the Second to distinguish it from the First⁷) was the American revival that began at the end of the eighteenth

⁶Confinement, however, is not an ultimate hindrance to the progress of the church, as seen by the fact that though the book of Acts ends with Paul being confined by means of house arrest, he is still able to preach and teach unhindered (Acts 28:31; cf. 2 Timothy 2:9).

⁷The First Great Awakening was the American component of a larger, transcontinental revival that took place during the middle of the eighteenth century A.D., led by three of the most prominent preachers in church history: Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitefield. It gave birth to such (at the time) Christian colleges as Princeton, Rutgers, Brown, and Dartmouth; to the Sunday night service; and to the practice of conducting nightly, weeklong (or more) special meetings.

century A.D. and continued for much of the first half of the nineteenth century A.D.

Interestingly, the revival began independently among various groups in various regions of the country. In New England, its origins can be traced to a late eighteenth century A.D. concert of prayer initiated by twenty-three New England pastors, among whom were the two outstanding Baptist preachers, Stephen Gano and Isaac Backus. This interchurch prayer endeavor involved devoting the first Tuesday in January and once a quarter thereafter to public prayer for revival in the land. God answered these prayers in 1802, as revival broke out on the campus of Yale⁸ (New Haven, CT) under the preaching of Yale's president, Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards. From Yale, it spread to other colleges, such as Dartmouth (Dartmouth, MA) and Williams College (Williamstown, MA).

The Second Great Awakening gave birth to such Christian (at the time) seminaries as Andover and Princeton, to the Sunday School movement, to the midweek prayer meeting, and to the modern missions movement⁹, which was ignited by the Haystack Prayer Meeting of 1806.

B. The Haystack Prayer Meeting of 1806

On a Saturday afternoon in August of 1806, Samuel J. Mills, James Richards, Francis L. Robbins, Harvey Loomis, and Byram Green, five students from Williams College (Williamstown, MA), gathered for an outdoor prayer meeting (since such a prayer meeting was essentially forbidden on campus) in western Massachusetts when a thunderstorm drove them to take refuge by a haystack, where they began to pray, ponder, and plan for some missionary agency to the heathen. After singing a hymn, Mills looked at the others, and over the roar of the drenching rain, cried out, "We can do this, if we will!" God answered their prayer with the formation in 1810 of The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the first foreign mission agency in America.¹⁰

C. The Prayer Meeting Revival of 1857-1858 (aka "The Third Great Awakening")

⁸God greatly used the ministry of a Yale graduate, evangelist Asahel Nettleton, to perpetuate the revival well into the nineteenth century.

⁹Accordingly, the nineteenth century A.D. has been dubbed "the Great Century" of Christian missions.

¹⁰Adoniram Judson was one of the first missionaries to be sent out under the auspices of this board.

On September 23, 1857, a lay outreach director of the Fulton Street Dutch Reformed Church in New York City by the name of Jeremiah Lanphier began a weekly lunch hour prayer meeting (from noon to 1 p.m.) for New York businessmen. Only six men showed at the initial meeting, the first after thirty minutes had passed. The second week, twenty showed up; the third week, forty. Soon the meetings became daily. When the stock market crashed in October, participation skyrocketed. Within six months, 10,000 New Yorkers were gathering throughout the city daily for prayer. Similar prayer meetings began to spring up throughout the country—in Chicago¹¹, Louisville, Cleveland, and St. Louis. The revival spread worldwide to such places as Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Europe, South Africa, India, Australia, and the Pacific islands. It is estimated that perhaps as many as one million were converted, including fifty thousand a week at the height of the revival. Some New England towns were left without a single unconverted person. It has been argued that it was this revival that helped America survive the Civil War that would soon follow. Also, some are of the opinion that the modern fundamentalist movement was borne out of this revival.

IV. Conclusion

If it is true (and it is) that prayer, particularly corporate prayer, is the key to the progress of the church, then it behooves the church today to, like the Jerusalem Church, continue steadfastly in corporate prayer (Acts 2:42) with one purpose, mind, or passion (Acts 1:14), that passion being the accomplishment of the mission given to the church (Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:47, and Acts 1:8), the spreading of God's fame for the sake of His name by the making and maturing of disciples through the ministry of His Word.

Such progress is God's will for each church, and the more each church aligns its prayers with God's will, the more He will answer (1 John 5:14-15), just as He did in the case of the early church, and just as He has done throughout church history.

So, how does the church progress? The answer is found in words the renowned 19th century missionary to China, J. Hudson Taylor once penned to fellow Chinese missionary, Jonathan Goforth: "Go forth on your knees."

¹¹A regular attendee of the Chicago prayer meetings was D. L. Moody, who once wrote to his mother: "I go to the meetings every night, and, oh, how I enjoy it. It seems as if God were here Himself. Mother, pray for me. Pray this work may go on, till every knee is bowed."