

Chapter 15

December 29, 1996

We have been, over the past weeks, considering the characteristics of prayer, or the qualifications of prayer that avails with God. What we have said about prayer applies to prayer of every kind prayed in every sort of circumstance. I want now to consider the two primary circumstances of prayer that we are shown and taught in the Bible: viz. corporate prayer and private prayer. Tonight I want to speak about corporate prayer. I'm happy for the providence that puts this subject at the end of the year and at the beginning of a new year, so that we can all consider what new commitment we might make to corporate prayer in the coming months.

In discussing corporate prayer, we could, of course, consider our prayer in Sabbath worship services, but we'll have other occasion to speak of that. I want to consider rather the congregation's main corporate prayer, its regular meeting for prayer, or what we commonly call 'the prayer meeting.'

I. The Problem

It does not require a vast acquaintance with the contemporary evangelical church to know that prayer meetings have fallen on particularly bad times. Where prayer meetings still exist, attendance is waning and a very large number of churches, whose theoretical commitment to prayer remains unchanged, have abandoned their prayer meeting altogether. I am well aware that very often that meeting has been replaced by small group meetings or fold groups or the like, which may well serve an important purpose in the life

of that church. I am also well aware that the sum total of corporate prayer in the life of a congregation is almost always reduced by such a change.

On the wider landscape of the church we have the new phenomenon of ‘concerts of prayer’ and the like. Again, there is certainly nothing at all wrong with people gathering to pray across their denominational lines; that is certainly to be welcomed. But, it must be faced that such meetings owe their impetus and their rationale in very large part to the fact that so little corporate prayer is any longer offered in the life of the local congregation.

I am also aware that a great many prayer meetings, so-called, are, in fact Bible studies with a short time devoted to prayer following or are prayer and praise meetings with prayer receiving but a share of the hour.

I also know that even where prayer meetings continue, even where their importance is stressed, even where they are managed well and have life and vitality, it is almost always the case that only a small portion of the Sunday morning congregation attends or participates.

Now certainly there is no particular reason why a prayer meeting has to be held mid-week. Churches I am acquainted with have, for example, a meeting for prayer on Sunday morning before the worship services. But, honestly, in many cases such a change in schedule was an accommodation to waning interest; a way of continuing to have some kind of prayer meeting while avoiding the demoralizing problem of a mid-week stated meeting to which very few of the congregation come. You can see the same kind of phenomenon in the worryingly rapid demise of the evening service in evangelical churches (including Presbyterian and Reformed churches). It would be one thing if that service were lost because all that could have been done there and needs to be done there were being done at another time. But the result is almost invariably that the congregation worships less, is taught Holy Scripture less, prays less, and fellowships less. In a day of declining spiritual life and power in the church, that hardly seems a recipe for renewal.

1. Richard Sibbes wrote long ago: ‘When we go to God by prayer, the devil knows we go to fetch strength against him, and therefore he opposes us all he can.’
2. It is difficult to believe that he is not particularly pleased by the developments he sees in the church with respect to corporate prayer. And

this is all the more true, I judge, because when corporate prayer is diminished for small group prayer or private prayer, what is chiefly lost is an emphasis on kingdom prayer, prayer for the Lord's church and the Gospel's progress at home and around the world. Even at the best of times the church's corporate prayer is usually too self-interested, too curved in on the life of the congregation itself. But when corporate prayer weakens, this tendency is enforced still more. The sick church member is still prayed for; but the Gospel's progress in the town and nation and world, the overthrow of Satan's kingdom and the advancement of the Kingdom of God are too little taken to God or are unmentioned altogether. Unlike Christ's own example in prayer (Scougal @ Mk 1) he had no sins to confess and few secular interests to pray for — yet He spent whole nights in prayer! What was he praying for except that the kingdom of God might be advanced?

And this entire development is all the more concerning and all the more shameful given the fact that it has occurred while the spiritual condition of our land and of the church has been worsening before our eyes. The developments in our day in both church and society have been calamitous, spiritual death is heaping up all around us, misery abounds on account of the most flagrant sin, God's name is blasphemed everywhere, the influence of the Gospel is on the wane, and all the while the church is praying less and less!

The Apostle Paul speaks of the joy he had in prayer with and for the church, but if it is at all possible to judge one's joy in prayer by one's attendance at prayer, and surely it is, then today's evangelical church has little of Paul's mind or heart about prayer.

Finally, I am also very ready to admit that over the past generation many prayer meetings which were and are still today faithfully maintained as part of the stated schedule of the church and were and are today, at least to some degree, supported by dutiful members of the church, were and are, to put it kindly, moribund.

I grew up in such prayer meetings as a boy and young man. Relatively few prayers offered by the same few folk week after week, individual prayers often quite long, and separated by silences of varying length—and sometimes of embarrassing length—with little heart, soul, strength, or mind. It was, frankly, hard to believe that anything of any real importance happened at

those meetings, and I now suspect that little did. The theory was that people were praying through those silences; the reality is they were wondering if and when anyone else would pray.

I need say no more to demonstrate that corporate prayer and the church's prayer meeting, and ours, is a timely topic deserving of our attention. Writing more than 100 years ago, Charles Spurgeon, lamenting the declining attendance at church prayer meetings, warned: '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.' How much more could this be said today!

II. The Need

It is not difficult to make from Holy Scripture the case for corporate prayer as a principal obligation of the church and primary instrumentality of her life and ministry. The principle of corporate prayer is deeply embedded in the Bible's whole doctrine of prayer.

1. '*Our father*' Shorter Catechism comment
2. The Psalms both indicate that the church prayed together and some of the kinds of prayers they prayed. (Ps 122:6) — Many other examples could be found in the OT.
3. Let me draw your attention, this evening, however, especially to the evidence of Acts (natural, easy in revival days—but this is still the pattern):
 - (a) Acts 1:14
 - (b) Acts 2:42 and 6:4 mean something else (But a good way of measuring the genuineness of our worship: it is really prayer? spoken to God?)
 - (c) Acts 4:24
 - (d) Acts 12:5,12 (nb 'the church' prayed; and as v. 12 further confirms, not just each Christian individually at home, but together met for the purpose.)
 - (e) Acts 21:5 Church at Tyre saying farewell to Paul (prayer at every occasion in which thanksgiving, or repentance, or petition needs to be sent to the Right Hand).

All of the evidence takes on still greater importance given Luke's purpose to include in his narrative of the early church especially representative facts, facts particularly descriptive of the life of the church as the Apostles gave it form and shape.

We cannot draw from this data the conclusion that every church must have a Wednesday night prayer meeting. However, we can draw from it these two conclusions: 1) the church must be mightily interested in corporate prayer and express her dependence upon the Lord and perform her ministry in the world through earnest and frequent corporate prayer and 2) no Christian whose life does not include faithful attendance upon the corporate prayer, especially the corporate petition, of the church is living apostolic Christianity.

[PERSONAL REMARK] MY PRACTICE IN PAST, HARANGUED TOO MUCH, BUT, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO AS YOUR MINISTER, SOFT-PEDAL THIS PART OF THE BIBLE'S TEACHING OF GOD'S WILL?

And when you combine this Biblical expectation of corporate prayer with all of the striking and sweeping and thrilling promises which the Lord makes to faithful prayer, what else can we possibly conclude, in our day, facing our circumstances, acknowledging the church's disinterest in prayer but this:

That the churches enemies are prevailing, her people are in so many cases and to such a great degree languishing — failing to ride on the heights of the land—, that her witness is pale and unpersuasive, her impact on the world very little, *because* she is not praying. She has not because she asks not!

Rev. 8:3-5 'the prayers of the saints' bring God's great purposes to pass in the world!

1. Regarding the reformation of the church in the 16th century Luther said: 'Prayer must do the deed' and it did!
2. Spurgeon once said that the most important event in the history of Scotland was when John Knox went upstairs to pray.

Isa. 62:6-7! We are to be those watchmen and what results!

And I do not doubt that the most important thing that could happen in our day would be for the church to discover once again its voice of prayer.

1. Its own reformation and revival
2. Its gaining blessings for our society (cf. Eusebius's account of Christian soldiers saving the army of Marcus Aurelius, Bk V, chapter v)
3. In a wonderful sermon on the church's corporate prayer, William Romaine, the 17th century Anglican and figure of the Great Awakening, wrote:

“Tell me, whenever the church's joint prayers did miscarry, in what place, in what case, or for what people? There is not an instance, wherein they failed. Prayers have been made for men in the church (good men and bad) and for men out of the church—and they have succeeded. Prayers have been made by land and upon the sea with success—they have prevailed above-ground, under-ground in dens and caves, and dungeons. Prayers have relieved dying men, poor men, prisoners, and captives; they have been made for men against temptations and sorrows, against the rage of persecutors and they have prevailed; and why should prayers not be as omnipotent now, as it has been formerly? Suppose our national sins cry aloud for vengeance, let our prayers cry louder for mercy. When one Elijah stood up for stiff-necked Israel, and one Amos for rebellious Judah, God shewed mercy; and Elijah and Amos were men of like passions with us: encouraged by their success, let us be importunate at the throne of grace, while God allows us an hour for prayer.” [Works, vol VI, pp. 197-198]

But can it be done in our day? Can we get Christians committed to regular corporate prayer? Can the life of congregational prayer be reborn in our churches? Yes it can, and you are the men responsible to see to it!

Honor to whom honor is due! If you want to know how to give, Paul told the church in Corinth, check out the Macedonian churches! Days of small things!

Gilcomston South Church of Scotland, 1975-1978—Where I learned what a prayer meeting is supposed to be and to do! The Rev. William Still

1. Saturday night: 3 hours (well-attended)
2. since mid 1940s, now almost 50 years.

3. ‘The powerhouse of the church’
4. The focus outward (the church hall peg board)—I am on that board and few Saturday nights go by without my being prayed for! Aileen Stewart’s recent Christmas card: “you are prayed for every Saturday night.”
5. The result: tremendous influence for a congregation of modest size.

It was not the entire church by any means. Probably not so much larger than our prayer meeting is now, perhaps ten or fifteen more. But what commitment; what seriousness; what faithfulness! Here is a prayer meeting that thought it had something to do with the fall of communism, and, *it did!* They prayed for its fall every Saturday night for 45 years!

Clearly that is the kind of prayer meeting we should have here. Will anyone dispute that it would be good if we had such a prayer meeting. Not exactly the same in every respect, but for commitment to the work of corporate prayer and especially corporate prayer for the advancement of the kingdom, surely that kind of prayer meeting is what we ought to be striving for. Let me now suggest some things which may prove useful to the accomplishment of that purpose.

III. The Way

1. In my judgment, it is very important to advertise the church’s corporate prayer as *work*. It is work, we all know that it is, corporate prayer especially, and I think that Christians are helped when it is acknowledged to be that and when they are helped to see that participation in the corporate prayer of the church is an important part of the work they are called upon to do for the Lord’s sake. It shifts the focus from the act of prayer itself to its purpose and outcome: advancing the kingdom of God in the world. It lends dignity and nobility to prayer, I believe, to consider it work.
 - (a) An emphasis at Gilcomston which we have followed with some success here I think.
 - (b) A sense both of duty and of the point of this prayer (too often in my past it was *not* clear why we were there; the emphasis was on

prayer — the duty of doing it —, not on what prayer was for and what is accomplished by it).

- (c) This emphasis is also very helpful in engaging more people's participation at the prayer meeting itself. —no more 'being led to pray'; —rather, roll up your sleeves and get to work!
- (d) The reason more Christians don't come to prayer is because it is hard work. Let us all face ourselves with the fact! It isn't so much that they are unspiritual as that we are lazy! And lest we say, "yes, but we have so many other responsibilities," remember, this is part of apostolic Christianity. No one is asking you to come to seven prayer meeting per week, just one, in order that we might live together as a congregation the life that our Savior has summoned us to live!

- 2. The great importance of practical and commonsensical approaches to this difficult work. Corporate prayer has a special character and peculiar difficulties and these should be openly acknowledged and an approach taken which is designed to serve the interests of this kind of prayer.

- (a) Length of prayers

In corporate prayer, one leads a group of people, all of whom are to be praying along in their hearts. This is difficult, we all know it is. It becomes impossible if the prayer is long, and yet many prayer meetings have for years been allowed to be spoiled with long prayers.

- i. Kenneth MacRae, in his Diary [p. 386] refers to a prayer meeting he led which was ruined by long prayers. He commented to himself afterward: 'A simple, direct little prayer would be far more to the point than a volume of divinity. These long, wordy, wandering prayers one hears so often in these quarters nowadays are squeezing the life out of our prayer meetings.'
- ii. Spurgeon complained about a man in one of his prayer meetings who prayed for most of half an hour and near the end asked the Lord to forgive his *shortcomings*!
- iii. If it is corporate prayer you are praying, you must pray as corporate prayer requires—full concentration of all in the prayer

being offered by one. I sometimes remind the prayer meeting folk to pray brief prayers which consider but one subject and to pray again later on behalf of another matter. Remind them: No ‘Dan to Beersheba’ prayers; their task is to lead others, not weary them into distraction.

(b) An Agenda for Prayer

This was a very impressive part of the Gilcomston South Prayer meeting for me. They knew what they were going to pray for. They didn’t leave it to chance. Some things came and went, but most of what they prayed for they prayed for every Saturday night for years on end!

We print an agenda every meeting with more on it than we could cover in a single meeting: a paragraph at the top for international news, missionary news and requests, etc.; a paragraph regarding needs in the presbytery; a large paragraph with matters of immediate concern in the church; the list of expecting mothers; a list of covenant children; of the sick; and, what we have come to call ‘The List’ all those in the orbit of this church for whose salvation we are praying by name.

—very specific information; so that the prayer meeting really has become the information center of the church. And those who do not attend do not learn nearly so much of what is happening in the rest of the Kingdom of God, whether here in Tacoma or in the farthest reaches of the world.

(c) Encourage simplicity

There are a great many Christians who are very reticent to pray in public, many more than there should be! And, without question, one of the reasons for this reticence is their fear that their prayers may not have an impressive appearance!

—Puritans in preaching ‘crucified their style’

—so should we in prayer (to avoid all pride in such a spiritual work and, all the more in corporate prayer, to put a stumbling block in no one’s way).

—John Knox’s definition of prayer: ‘earnest and familiar talking with God’ Let it be so in the prayer meeting and more will feel free to join in leading prayers.

3. The Corporate ‘Amen’ This too is a Biblical form for prayer and especially for corporate prayer which has often been neglected to our real hurt. It is the Biblically appointed and illustrated method for an entire congregation to signal and express its participation in a prayer which has been offered by one of them. It is a commonplace in the corporate prayers of both the OT and the NT, of both the Jewish and the Gentile churches. Some of us may have been put off its public use by its usage as an exclamation in fundamentalist services. That use has no Biblical illustration or support. But as a way of ending a prayer, including a corporate prayer, it is the Biblical norm. (e.g. 1 Cor 14:16 ‘how can those who do not understand say ‘Amen‘ to your thanksgiving?’ Often in the psalms and other corporate prayers of the Bible).
 - (a) As Augustine put it: ‘Brethren, your Amen is your subscription, your consent, your agreement.’
 - (b) Tertullian re the early church practice.
 - (c) Our experience in Tacoma confirms the wisdom of the Scripture’s recommendation. The requirement of saying the ‘Amen’ at the end of each prayer is a wonderful help in concentration and prayer after prayer allows an active and outward assent and so contributes to a sense of real participation in every prayer. I know that many of you have found the “Amen” as helpful as I have in eliciting my concentration and involvement in the prayers of others. I have to stay with them to add my “Amen.”
4. This practice will not come naturally! We still have made only a beginning here!
5. Spread such corporate praying as a living part of the church’s life to other times and places.

The principle of living corporate prayer will not likely fare as well if those principles are not served, illustrated, and commended at other times the church prays and in other places than the prayer meeting itself.

- (a) The worship service
 - My problem with a long pastoral prayer is two-fold

- i. It is not commended in Scripture, so far as I can tell
- ii. It breaks all the rules of corporate prayer, and chiefly those of brevity and simplicity.

I know we have a tradition of such a prayer. I know that the great Scottish pastors of the last century were often celebrated for the spirituality of their half-hour long prayers. Mr. Still himself in the Sabbath services prayed at length! But I remain unconvinced. I grew up under those prayers as did many of you. You know the difficulty of staying with them, of participating in them, of gaining a sense that that prayer is your prayer. And, I think you probably know how few in your congregation actually stay with that prayer. I think many ministers who still offer such a prayer are aware, at least at a certain level, that few, if any, are with them from beginning to end. But then, why on earth do we continue to pray that way.

- (b) Congregational participation led from the front by an officer or, as in our case, by any man, is much to be preferred.
- (c) Our ‘congregational petitions’
- (d) Nights of prayer
- (e) Special occasions: we should do more of this I think.

IV. Conclusion

I cannot hold up our experience or practice here at Faith Presbyterian as a model—except as evidence that something can be done. We are too imperfect for that. But I do not doubt this, the Lord has blessed us for our prayer more than for anything else we have done as a congregation. Over the years we have had many wonderful, even exceptional nights at prayer meeting, when the Lord drew near and helped us and we have had some dramatic and thrilling answers to our prayers. The presence of God has been in our midst. And I am sure our blessing as a church will be as our congregational prayer.

The Lord, I believe loves and will not fail to bless a faithful prayer meeting. To that end let me conclude with this bit of history from the Great Awakening in Wales. William Williams is here relating his attendance in 1762 at a weak and dispirited prayer meeting, so dispirited, in fact, that they had decided to give it up, to stop meeting, as it had come to seem futile to the remaining participants. [Evans, Daniel Rowland, p. 313]

“At last, forced by cowardice, unbelief, and the onslaughts of Satan, we resolved to give up our special meeting, and now we were about to offer a final prayer, fully intending never again to meet thus in fellowship. But it is when man reaches the lowest depths of unbelief that God imparts faith, and when man has failed, that God reveals Himself. So here with us, in such straits, on the brink of despair, with the door shut on every hope of success, God Himself entered into our midst, and the light of day from on high dawned upon us. One of the brethren, yes, the most timid of us all, the one who was strongest in his belief that God would never visit us, while in prayer, was stirred in his spirit and laid hold powerfully on heaven as one who would never let go. His tongue spoke unusual words, his voice was raised, his spirit was aflame. He pleaded, he cried to God, he struggled, he wrestled in earnest like Jacob, in the agony of his soul. The fire took hold of others, all were awakened, the coldest to the most heedless took hold and were warmed; the spirit of struggling and wrestling fell on all, we all went with him into the battle; with him we laid hold upon God, His attributes, His Word and His promises, resolving that we would never let go our hold until our desire should be satisfied.”

What I long for here is still more solid, faithful, commitment support for the corporate prayer of the church, for that prayer to be continued to be devoted more and more to the interests of the kingdom of God and its advance in the world, and for all of us to feel together that the prayer meeting is the powerhouse of the church so that, even if we are not there on one Wednesday night or another, we fully appreciate the great significance of the work that is being done by those who are there.

Let me conclude this study of corporate prayer with these words from George Smeaton. He too returns to the church's prayers in the early part of Acts as the supreme example for us today. It is a lengthy quote, but worth our hearing.

“As to the peculiar mode of praying, we may say that in every season of general awakening the Christian community waits just as they waited for the effusion of the Spirit, with one accord in

prayer and supplication in the interval between the Ascension and Pentecost. No other course has been prescribed; and the church of the present has all the warrant she ever had to wait, expect, and pray. The first disciples waited in the youthfulness of simple hope, not for a spirit which they had not, but for more of the Spirit which they had; and Christianity has not outlived itself. Ten days they waited with one accord in prayer, when of a sudden the Spirit came to give them spiritual eyes to apprehend divine things as they never knew them before, and to impart a joy which no man could take from them. It was prayer in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18) and prayer for the Spirit, the great 'promise of the Father'. But the prayer which brought down the Holy Ghost was not that style of petition which ceases if it is not heard at once, or if the heart is out of tune. The prayer which prevails with Him who gives the Spirit is that which will not let Him go without the blessing. When the spirit of extraordinary supplication is poured out from on high — when an urgent desire is cherished for the Holy Ghost — when the church asks according to God's riches in glory, and expects such great things as God's promises warrant and Christ's merits can procure — the time to favour Zion, the set time, is come (Ps. 102:16-18). When we look at the prayers in Scripture, we find that God's glory, the church's growth and welfare, her holiness and progress, were ever higher in the thoughts and breathings of the saints than personal considerations. And if we are animated with any other frame of mind, it is not prayer taught by the Spirit, nor offered up in the Name of Christ. The prayer attitude of the church in the first days after the Ascension, when the disciples waited for the Spirit, should be the church's attitude still. I need not refer to the copious references of the Apostles to the urgent duty of praying 'in the Spirit' and praying 'for the Spirit', nor shall I refer at large to the habits of all true labourers, such as Luther, Welsh, Whitefield, and others, in proof of the great truth that prayer is the main work of the ministry. And no more mischievous and misleading theory could be propounded, nor any one more dishonouring to the Holy Spirit, than the principle adopted by the Plymouth Brethren, that because the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, the church has no need, and no warrant, to pray any

more for the effusion of the Spirit of God. On the contrary, the more the church asks the Spirit and waits for His communication, the more she receives. The prayer of faith in one incessant cry comes up from the earth in support of the efforts put forth for the conversion of all people ready to perish. This prayer goes before and follows after all the calls to repentance.” [Cited in Lloyd-Jones, The Puritans, pp. 20-22]

How many of us have stirred ourselves to take hold of God and his blessing and his working among us and through us in this way. How many? And how well? How faithfully and constantly? This is the biblical teaching. This is apostolic Christianity. This has been the way of the Spirit’s advance from the beginning and will continue to be his way to the end. This is the teaching and this was the practice of our fathers. They waited upon God and cried and cried until he rent the heavens and came down. We must do no less! Everything depends upon our doing no less!