

Have We Lost the Priority?

Derek Prime

I wonder how we can encourage Christians in the UK to give a special place to the church prayer meeting. I detect a change in attitude to corporate prayer and a tendency for it to decline. At the same time, it seems that God's blessing often rests conspicuously on churches where it is a practised priority.

No book has left a greater impression upon me regarding the place of corporate prayer than one by a namesake of mine, although no relation. Samuel Prime wrote a book in 1859 entitled *The power of prayer*.

It was the last book that, just before his death in 1981, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones urged the Banner of Truth Trust to republish. It describes the amazing events of the revival in 1858 in New York and elsewhere in America.

An outstanding feature of the revival was the concentration on corporate prayer. The book excited me as I realised afresh the privilege God has given us of coming to him together to seek the interests of his Son's kingdom.

Born in prayer

The church was born in a prayer meeting (Acts 1:12-2:1). After the Ascension the disciples, according to their Lord's instruction, prayed together in the upstairs room where they were staying.

We do not know of any specific instruction from our Lord that they should spend the time in prayer. But they knew enough from all he had taught them in his three years of ministry that it was the best use of their time.

This was the proper preparation for Pentecost, and it seems to have been the God-purposed preparation for every outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Historically, so far as I can understand, periods of spiritual quickening and revival have gone in hand with God's people coming together to pray.

Can we have any proper expectation of such a longed for experience today, without our first seeking God's face together for it?

Directed by prayer

In times of crisis the early church found its direction in its prayer meetings. Forbidden to teach and preach about the Lord Jesus, Peter and John returned to their own people, and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them (Acts 4:23).

Instead of calling a conference or a seminar on how to react to public opposition to the gospel and world evangelisation, they immediately lifted up their voices together in prayer. As they did so, the Holy Spirit directed them to Scriptures which showed them how to pray in God's will (Acts 4:24).

Rather than asking for relief, they prayed for strength to be obedient to their Master's final commission. 'After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly' (Acts 4:31).

The power of prayer

The early church saw the activities of hostile governments and evil powers frustrated as they met together to pray (Acts 12:1-18). Peter was in prison, and his life was in danger. The church met for prayer.

The swiftness of God's answers took them by surprise. First, Peter was released from prison by a miracle of God's intervention. Then the king responsible for persecuting the church — Herod Agrippa — had his rule cut short by sudden death.

The early church discovered God's will and obtained his guidance as they prayed together. When the leaders of the church at Antioch needed to know whom they should appoint as missionaries to the Gentile world, they met to pray (Acts 13:1-3).

As they did so, the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the task. There was no doubt about God's choice, and the consequences for the kingdom were immense.

Whether it is revival we properly long for, or direction and power in evangelism, or the frustration of Satan's activities in the world, or the discovery of God's will concerning leadership in the church — the prayer meeting has an indispensable place in the life of God's people.

Getting out of the rut

Prayer meetings can admittedly sometimes get into a rut. That may be one of the reasons many do not attend. Prayer meetings can often fail to be prayer meetings — too much time is spent in Bible exposition, singing, and talking about things for which to pray.

It may sound strange to say that too much time may be given to Bible exposition! The purpose of Bible reading in a prayer meeting, however, is first to turn our thoughts to God and warm our hearts to him, and, secondly, to direct our prayers into his will.

Few things are more helpful in a prayer meeting than for those participating to respond in prayer to the truths of Scripture. Prayer meetings are at their most effective when guided and directed by God's Word. But they should not become Bible studies with prayer as an afterthought.

Well-being

To sing an appropriate hymn or song at a prayer meeting is helpful, especially at the beginning, since it helps us direct our thoughts to God and puts our hearts in tune with him. But thereafter we should concentrate on prayer itself.

Prayer meetings must not become talking shops, where we spend as much time talking about needs as praying for them. Of course, it is important to impart information to aid intelligent prayer — but not so much information that little time remains to seek God's face.

Would it help if every church, at its business meetings, had an agenda item called, 'The well-being of the church prayer meeting' — and ensured that their leaders lead by example?

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