

United, Focussed and Militant Prayer

Bill Dyer

In Acts 4:24 the disciples raised their voices together in prayer to God. The whole church, from apostles to recent converts, came together to call upon God. All participated; all were valued.

They were practising 'the priesthood of all believers'. But are we in danger of creating a new priesthood of church leaders, who carry the responsibility – almost in isolation – for seeking God's will, finding ways to reach the lost, re-engaging with culture and community, and much more besides?

Is there a danger that some church leaders, reluctant to involve the whole church in seeking the Lord's will about the really big issues, are almost without realising it, taking to themselves a priestly role?

As a result, the church prayer meeting becomes the place for 'maintenance prayer' for supporting the ongoing family life of the church, but not for serious seeking after the mind and power of Christ.

United

Of course, leaders are appointed by God to lead. It is a huge and scary responsibility, so they, above all, should feel the need for the whole church to be wrestling with God over the big issues.

Until the church does this, how will we change? How will we reach our broken, secular culture with the gospel? How can we avoid becoming a religious ghetto and instead be living and vibrant, Christ-like, witnessing and serving in our community?

Leaders should be encouraging the whole church to pray for the 'Lord of the harvest' to raise up a new generation of gospel ministers and overseas workers. We need the whole church to pray for the Lord to empower his preachers with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, for real conviction of sin, and for an abundant harvest of genuine conversions.

Above all the whole church needs to be gripped by the urgency of the gospel and the plight of sinners facing the eternal wrath of God. Our prayer meetings need to focus on these weighty issues, so that even our busiest people feel compelled to come if they possibly can.

Such will have to be convinced that the prayer meeting is the power house of the church and that's where the real action is; that's where the really serious business is done with God, and it's worth them making that extra effort and sacrifice of time to come.

Isn't this what we long to see, not a new generation of priests, but the priesthood of all believers together calling down the blessing of God in these needy days?

Focused

'Now, Lord, enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders' (Acts 4:29-30).

There is nothing vague here. The disciples asked boldly for the really big issues and stayed focused upon those.

You can't imagine that in the middle of that focused prayer meeting someone would have prayed for the unemployed, others for the sick, bereaved and elderly, and yet others for their neighbours or young people at university. It just wouldn't have happened!

Yet that is how our prayer meetings are so often conducted today. True, those early Christians were facing a major crisis. But aren't we facing a major crisis today?

Only one child in a hundred knows the gospel. A whole culturally and religiously disinherited generation is in danger of being swept into hell, without even hearing the gospel.

And up to 100,000 British people have converted to Islam in recent times. Many have become disillusioned with the alcoholism, immorality, materialism and emptiness of life in modern Britain, and have been drawn to the moral standards of Islam. But why aren't they turning to the joy and peace of new life in Jesus instead?

Christianity is now so misrepresented and discredited by the media that, in the minds of many people, the Christian church is no longer a serious option for needy people.

Real

We Christians need to 'get real'! Prayer time is too often dominated by personal needs and the needs of people close to us. Too much private and public prayer is for humanitarian, rather than spiritual and eternal needs.

Only a minority of prayer is for the spiritual growth of Christians, for the anointing of the Spirit upon preaching, for conviction of sin and conversions, for the raising of future leaders and men for Christian ministry, for God to come to our land again in revival and glorify his great name among us.

Of course we must give time for pastoral prayer. As the family of God, we love each other in Christ. Of course we will give time to uphold each other in times of unemployment, sickness, tragedy and bereavement. That should go without saying.

But perhaps we can achieve both this and prayer for the big issues by dividing prayer meetings between the two aspects? This presents a challenge for the small prayer groups. Small groups can be helpful, but their natural tendency is for prayer to become insular, sharing just the concerns of individuals.

I think the ideal is for us to experience both the more intimate experience of a small group and the more expansive experience of the whole church calling upon God together. But, in both situations, the leaders must ensure that a major part of the prayer is focused upon wrestling with God about the really big issues, or in most cases it just won't happen.

Militant

The Christians in Acts 4 know they were under spiritual attack. Their battle was not just against flesh and blood (the Jewish authorities), but against the 'spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'.

Therefore, they engaged in spiritual warfare, which means they needed the power of God to deal with their enemies. 'Sovereign Lord!' they prayed, calling upon him to rise up and overthrow their persecutors.

This is serious stuff. These Christians are taking up arms. They are going into battle. The future declaration of the gospel is at stake, and they are desperate for God to intervene. And God does, powerfully, intervene on their behalf.

What is the relevance of spiritual warfare today? 'Surely', many think, 'that subject is best left to Pentecostals and Charismatics?' But is our Reformed theology now so sophisticated as to leave no room for the devil and all that?

It might seem so, judging by the lack of spiritual warfare in our prayer meetings. And isn't this why the powers of darkness are thriving and we are making such little progress?

We seem to have lost our fire-power. It's as though we are just shooting with blanks, while the enemy is using live ammunition. He is emboldening militant, secular atheism. He is promoting and protecting a fast-growing Islam.

He is blinding the minds of unbelievers so that we see very few conversions. He is making the gospel appear a laughing stock, turning gospel churches into gospel ghettos, splitting churches and discouraging God's servants.

And yet few of us today take the devil seriously, as Jesus did. The fact is, Reformed Christians are generally naive about spiritual warfare. We have greatly underestimated our spiritual enemy and his achievements in recent years.

Purposeful

Someone has compared evangelicals to a grounded battleship, which once displayed awesome fire-power, but now the military just uses it as target practice for their war planes.

Without effective, militant prayer our churches provide target practice for the devil and his wiles. We desperately need the spiritual tide to rise, to get spiritually afloat once again.

We need to be real with the living God in prayer and engage in serious spiritual warfare. When we gather for prayer, do we come as 'good soldiers of Christ'? Do we come like people who believe we are engaged in the most important battle in the world?

Do we come as God's fighting unit and in good fighting order? Do we come as God's army, or are we more like 'Dad's army'?

Years ago, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, at a Bala ministers' conference, stopped the prayer meeting, and said, 'Gentlemen, you are praying like men on holiday!' Derek Swann said, 'There is too much of the playground and not enough of the battlefield about our praying today.'

The early Christians engaged in serious spiritual warfare in their praying, and that is what our God is calling us too in our prayer meetings. 'Soldiers of Christ arise, and put your armour on'!

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