

The Prayer Meeting

By Aaron Dunlop

The place of public prayer has fallen on hard times. Some churches argue that it is not commanded by Scripture and is an extracurricular and optional. Others have so filled their church program with other activities that there is no time for the prayer meeting. Whatever the reason for jettisoning the public prayer meeting there is one simple principle at work, and that is carnality triumphing over spirituality.

While there are many examples of corporate prayer in the Scriptures (e.g. I Kings 8:22; Ezra 9:5; Acts 4:31ff; 12:5) the question we are answering here is, do the Scriptures command us specifically to meet for corporate prayer outside of the worship or preaching services of the Church and, if so, what is the significance of this meeting?

The Biblical Principle of Corporate Prayer

In Matthew 18:19-20 Christ, giving official instruction for the Church, says *"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."*

This directive in the form of a promise, in light of the aggregate of Scripture, ought to be considered a very solemn command. It is preceded by the divine prerogative *"I say unto you."* It is accomplished in the divine plan of the Father (*"of my Father"*) and through the divine presence of the Holy Spirit (*"there am I in the midst of them"*). It is not to be taken lightly. Christian living is conformity to the example of Christ as well as his command (cf. 1 John 2:6)

The smallest possible plurality met in Christ's name constitutes the

true church, and can be a powerful force for good through concerted prayer. This is not a mere matter of mathematics, or a strength-in-numbers mentality. The point Christ is making is simple; there is special power for God's people when they come as a church unit in the audible agreement of corporate prayer. The power to affect this lies in unity and agreement. This is first of all a unity in Christ, for Christ speaks of being *"gathered together in my name."* Unity and fellowship in the Church begins in Christ and without him there is no fellowship either with the Father or with the church (Philippians 1:5; 1 John 1:3,7).

Unity is, secondly, a unity of spirit and purpose. This is the force of the Lord's words in Matthew 18:19: *"If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask..."* The word translated "agree" literally means 'to sound together' (sumphoneo) and is primarily used to speak of the agreement of sound in musical instruments. When used of persons it refers to the audible agreement between parties (cf. Acts 5:9; Matthew 20:2).

This "agreement" is marked by sincerity in a clear conscience; in the absence of ulterior motives (Matthew 6:5), and with a love for the brethren (Romans 12:9) and the good of the Church (Matthew 18:19).

The writer to the Hebrews indicates this same agreement in Hebrews 13:18 *"Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly."* It was this agreement with those to whom he is writing in a *"good conscience"* that he holds out as his confidence. He was not asking them to pray for a matter in which he was not willing to acquiesce with the will of God, or to be delivered from

anything that he was not willing to forsake. The Lord has ordained a special virtue for corporate united prayer because it manifests unity of mind and heart. Philippians 1:27 *"...that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."*

Furthermore; when the Lord was teaching the exercise of prayer to the disciples he implied unity and mutual respect for the Church at large in the use of the plural personal pronoun (Luke 11:2ff *"Forgive us," "Lead us"*).

The Old Testament Prophecy of Corporate Prayer

The Old Testament prophecies of an age when corporate prayer would be the distinguishing mark of the Church, as it was in the ancient church. In Isaiah 56:7 the prophet writes, *"For mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people."* The Lord Jesus used these words himself in Luke 11:17 when he chased the merchandisers out of the temple.

The emphasis of the Isaiah passage, however, is on the fact that *"all people"* (i.e. Gentiles) would be admitted, and that corporate prayer would be the outstanding sign of their conversion. The Gentiles would meet in the unity of corporate prayer (in the *"house of prayer"*).

Ezekiel makes the same emphasis laid on the ingathering of the Gentiles in the Gospel age; through corporate prayer. In Ezekiel 36:37 *"Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them..."* The term *"house of Israel"* signifies the concerted effort of the body of the people of God.

Hence, the Old Testament points to the importance of private and corporate prayer. Now let us consider the New Testament.

The New Testament Priority of Corporate Prayer

The Divine appointment of the prayer meeting was not ignored by the early Church. The apostolic church generally followed the Jewish hours of prayer (Acts 3:1), purging them of all superstition and keeping them in the spirit of faith and free from all legalism.

The primary characteristic of the early seasons of prayer and the strength of the early church was unity and agreement - "*singleness of heart*" (Acts 2:46). Acts 1:14 records that the disciples met "*with one accord in prayer and supplication*" and when difficulty came and the Church was under persecution it was to corporate prayer that they turned, (Acts 4:23-29; 12:5).

Danger however, was not the only impetus for prayer. There was a continual leaning on and looking to the Lord in prayer for wisdom (Acts 13:1-3) and for evangelism (Acts 16:12-15).

The Historic Productivity of Corporate Prayer

C. H. Spurgeon regarded the prayer meeting as the most important meeting of the Church; he referred to it as the "thermometer of the Church." If corporate prayer is set out in Scripture by example, and commanded both by examples and directive it is not surprising that the Lord has endowed it with signal blessing. Many, many revivals have been the result of concerted corporate prayer (not the least Pentecost, Acts 1:14 cf. 2:1), indeed it is often said that when God is about to do something with the Church he sets his people praying.

Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the Waldensians in northern Italy were pursued and persecuted by the Catholic Church. History records repeated occasions when as a result of concerted corporate prayer the Lord delivered them from being massacred.

In 1744 a group of Christian ministers in Scotland began a scheme of concerted prayer and by private correspondence persuaded a number of other ministers and lay people in America in the same scheme. Although there were showers of blessing in Scotland as a result, attention was drawn to America when nine months after the praying began David Brainerd, the missionary to the Native Americans, saw the beginning of revival success.

In 1806 four freshmen from Williams College in Massachusetts met by a haystack to pray for the heathen of Asia. That meeting, later known as "The Haystack Meeting," was the birth place of foreign missions in North America, and through which Adoniram Judson was sent to India.

The 1850's in America saw the beginning of what was called "The Prayer Meeting Revival." News of this reached Northern Ireland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland deputized three ministers to visit. Meanwhile in a little village called Kells, four men began to meet in 1857 to pray for revival. They met every Friday night for two years until the Lord broke through in revival blessing.

History abounds with illustrations of how God honoured them that honoured him in corporate prayer; these are but a few.

The Basic Practicality of Corporate Prayer

The Lord Jesus gave multiple warnings against public prayer in general. These warnings were dealing with the individual praying alone in public, and not specifically addressing corporate prayer. However, the warning against ulterior motives holds good for all prayer. There are two very basic snares that we need to be aware of and avoid in attending the place of public prayer; the love of attention and the fear of man.

When there is an audience it is within human nature to perform; (Matthew 6:5. "*And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men...*").

Another snare that the devil would have you fall into is the fear of man (Proverbs 29:25) where the individual is afraid to open his mouth in prayer for fear some one might think he could not pray or was inferior or not as eloquent as another.

These two snares of mere performance and nervous silence will stifle any prayer meeting. Prayer is directed to God, not to man. Whether dazzled by the brilliance of prayerful eloquence or encouraged by the freshness of a new voice it does not matter what men think. For a believer to pray publicly is a great encouragement to the body and a strengthening to the individual.

The Prayer Meeting is no optional extra for the Church; it is the driving-force behind it, the flagship of all its operations, the heartbeat of all its fellowship, and the bond of all unity in the body. It is the *sine qua non* of the house of God. □

"When thou prayest let thy words be few, but thy thoughts and affections many, and above all let them be profound. The less thou speakest the better thou prayest.....external and bodily prayer is that buzzing of the lips, that outside babble that is gone through without any attention, and which strikes the ears of men; but prayer in spirit and in truth is the inward desire, the motions, the sighs, which issue from the depths of the heart. The former is the prayer of hypocrites and of all who trust in themselves; the latter is the prayer of the children of God who walk in his fear."

Martin Luther