

HOW TO RESURRECT THE PRAYER MEETING



Musical artists, celebrities, and football games attract exuberant crowds. Even a popular preacher or a well-known worship leader can draw thousands of enthusiastic people. But when a prayer meeting is announced, few show up. Sadly, when God is the only attraction, there is normally plenty of open seats. God may be the most unpopular person in today's churches. How have God's people gotten to this dismal place?

WHY THE PRAYER MEETING HAS DIED

The methods utilized for prayer in most churches contribute to the lack of participation in and enthusiasm for prayer. The trouble with most prayer meetings is that they are *problem centered*, not *God centered*. Everything revolves around people's difficulties and crises. Most prayer gatherings begin without a word of praise or thanksgiving to God. From the outset, a dizzying array of special requests are typically verbalized—issues like Aunt Susie's toe fungus, traveling mercies for a third cousin ten states away, physical needs, ailing body parts, and a host of other man-centered requests. It's impossible to remember all the details. And who has the capacity to identify on a heart level with such a huge number of people they have never even met? Prayer bulletins are loaded with more needs and requests. The deluge of difficulties can be overwhelming.

After fifteen to twenty minutes of sharing "special requests" (special only to the people making the requests), someone offers a ninety second prayer asking for blanket blessing over all the challenges. After the "Amen" people file out with little expectation for change. This is repeated week after week. The same faithful few come back to rehearse a repeated litany of ills and concerns.

Let's be candid. A needs-based, problem-centered, request-focused prayer meeting can be discouraging and even depressing. Further, listening to problem after problem without faith for change is draining. Prayer meetings should impart life, not exhaust us. The monotony, vagueness, and lack of expectancy contribute to the lack of fervency. But don't despair—Spirit-filled individuals are drawn to vital prayer meetings. Revamping the prayer ministries in our churches can be the gateway to revival!

RESURRECTING THE PRAYER MEETING

Charles Spurgeon said, "We shall never see much change for the better in our church in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians." His ministry was fueled by what he called the "furnace room," where hundreds of believers bombarded heaven with believing prayer. Spurgeon credited the success of his ministry to the prayers offered by the members of his church.

What can we do to resurrect the prayer meeting in our churches today? Five simple principles can change and invigorate our prayer times.

BE GOD FOCUSED. The model prayer, or the Lord's Prayer, opens with "Our Father" and ends with an appeal to God's glory. Note carefully that the first three petitions focus on God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will: "Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" (Matt. 6:9–10). Hallowing God's name, advancing God's kingdom, and implementing God's will come before any man-centered petitions. To revitalize our prayer meetings, we must begin with these vertical concerns.

When Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into jail for casting a demon out of a woman,

how did they react? They did not contact the prayer chain. They did not call the Jerusalem Law Association or the Anti-Defamation League. Instead, "Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God" (Acts 16:25). Instead of appealing to man for help or moaning about their woes, they "sang praises unto God". They had a worship-based prayer meeting.

Praise should precede petition. When we begin our praying with needs instead of God's glory, we go against the scriptural pattern. Our prayer times must begin with worship. The God-focused prayers of individuals who faced staggering problems (Daniel in Daniel 6:10; Hezekiah in Isaiah 37:14-17) are strong examples for us in this. Then we can move on to the needs of others and our own needs: daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil.

BE SCRIPTURE DRIVEN. The model prayer is a pattern for prayer. It is not a formula for us to repeat but a guide for us to pray through. It's more like a scaffolding than a building, more like a skeleton than a body. It gives us categories, or guidelines, to pray through. When the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), Jesus instructed them to pray this way:

- Our Father (recognition of God)
- Hallowed be Your name (worship of God)
- Your kingdom come (expansion of God's kingdom)
- Your will be done, as in heaven, so on Earth (implementation of God's will)
- Give us day by day our daily bread (asking of God)
- Forgive us our sins (confession to God)
- For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us (forgiveness of others)
- Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (deliverance from the enemy)

This prayer from Scripture teaches us to cover numerous aspects of life in prayer. Different seasons call for differing facets of prayer. We should start with God-focused and worship-based prayer, and then highlight the area of prayer most applicable to our current situations.

Reading Bible prayers is a good way to start a corporate prayer time. As leaders, we should take note of the scriptures that resonate with our spirits, paying attention to verses that jump off the page, excite our imaginations, and speak to our hearts. We can then select promises of God appropriate to current circumstances and plead those promises to God in prayer. Scripture-driven prayer is always in season.

As we read the Bible, it should read us. In other words, the Lord should direct the dialogue. Biblical praying is always in accordance with scriptural principles, so we must allow the Bible (God's thoughts) to be our springboard into prayer.

BE SPIRIT LED. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). The Holy Spirit is the missing Person in countless prayer gatherings. He is the only Person qualified to guide us in prayer. He is so fervent about prayer that He literally groans when He prays. As we pray under His gracious influence, we enter into the burdens of God's heart. The Spirit of God will direct us to lead our people in prayer.

Being rightly connected to the Spirit will lead us to effective prayer. A man saw Ben Franklin holding a string during a thunder storm and asked what he was doing. Franklin told him that he was flying a kite. "I don't see a kite," the man replied. Franklin told him, "I can't see it, but I can feel the tug." We can't see God's Spirit, but when we feel the Spirit of prayer calling us to

intercede, we should indulge His promptings. The flesh never prods us to pray, and neither does the devil. Only the Spirit of God knows the mind and heart of God. We must cooperate with God by seizing every holy impulse to approach His throne in prayer.

BE FAITH FILLED. Biblical praying is more than hoping for an answer; it is believing ahead of time that our requests will be answered. Faith-filled praying anticipates God's response by thanking Him in advance. Anyone can offer thanks after an answer is manifested; it is easy to believe once the answers are evident. But faith-filled praying banks on the answer before it arrives. Thanking God is the first step in faith.

The apostle Thomas typified modern church members when he found it difficult to believe. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, Thomas stated he would not believe without visual and physical evidence (John 20:25). Afterward Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands... and be not faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). Upon seeing the resurrected Christ, Thomas finally believed that Jesus was alive. He believed because he "saw" with his eyes. Then Jesus said, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Biblical faith believes before the answer is obvious. We must train ourselves and others to pray in faith. Stop praying with question marks and start praying with exclamation points. Pray faith filled prayers!

BE SHEPHERD DIRECTED. The apostles who shepherded the early church limited themselves to two key functions: prayer and ministering the Word (see Acts 6:4), and of these two priorities, prayer came first. The apostles gave themselves to prayer, which speaks not just of personal prayer, but their responsibility to oversee and lead the early church in prayer. They prayed about mobilizing the congregation in prayer. Then they implemented the directives the Lord placed upon their hearts.

Surveys have found that pastors today spend hours preparing for Sunday sermons. But preparation time for prayer meetings is generally token at best. Could it be that the attendance in each of these services reflects the time spent in preparation? We are top heavy on instruction and woefully weak on implementation of prayer. The passionless congregations in our churches today are a direct result of emphasizing academics in preaching while neglecting the planning of corporate prayer.

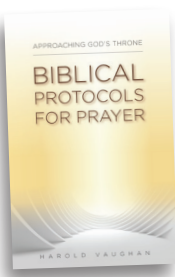
So much effort goes into organizing the activities of the church, but God's presence and power in our midst come from united prayer. The early church prioritized prayer, and the shepherds led the way by organizing the church to pray. The role of the shepherd in resurrecting and revitalizing the prayer meetings in our churches cannot be overstated. Will you invest adequate time toward transforming your church into a house of prayer?

BUILDING HOUSES OF PRAYER

Many churches use prayer like a zipper: they open their services with a prayer and then close them with a prayer. Some churches also have a weekly prayer meeting, which a handful of people attend. A pastor of a large church became burdened about the lack of prayer in his congregation, so he preached a series of messages on prayer over the course of a year. But no noticeable improvement took place. Talking about prayer without putting it into practice corporately will never transform a congregation into a house of prayer. The only way to develop a praying church is to incorporate life-giving prayer into the services. Preaching is vitally important, but activating the church to pray is the foundation for effective preaching and transforming a congregation into a house of prayer.

APPLICATION

- ◆ Pray about your church's prayer meetings. Listen to the creative instructions that God gives you to direct your church in prayer.
- ◆ Move toward God-focused prayer meetings. Let the worship of God be primary. Honoring God's name, advancing God's kingdom, and implementing God's will must come first. Move from a needs-based prayer format toward a worship-based format. Petition and intercession for human concerns are essential, but they come after God's concerns.
- ◆ Incorporate singing and praise in your gatherings for prayer. A Spirit-filled song leader who enjoys worship creates an inviting atmosphere for others to enter into the spirit of praise.
- ◆ Sample Format: Begin with joyful songs. Utilize gifted musicians and singers to lead in lively songs. Then give a brief scriptural challenge and instruct the people to huddle in groups of three to implement the challenge. Sing more songs before giving another concise scriptural exhortation followed with implementation. This sequence can be repeated for the entire meeting.
- ◆ You can keep the prayer meeting fresh by changing it up. "Life" in the prayer meeting is more important than the "length" of the prayer meeting. Don't let the meeting drag on. Vary the way you conduct prayer times: Pray in groups. Pray as families. Pray out loud. Pray individually. Target specific burdens. Pray over the sick. Pray for the unsaved. Pray for God's reviving presence to invade your assembly.
- ◆ Delete all human requests from your church's prayer bulletin one week, and center on only God-focused requests. This will get people's attention!
- ◆ Declutter the prayer meeting. Have people pray prayer requests instead of speaking them out. Encourage people to exercise faith and believe God as others pray their requests and needs.
- ◆ Celebrate answers to prayer. Offer praise for answered requests. Make a big deal of it when God responds to the group's supplications.
- ◆ In the book, *Approaching God's Throne: Biblical Protocols for Prayer*, eighteen unique protocols are discussed. You can designate 8 to 12 weeks, or more toward revitalizing the prayer meetings in your church. Emphasize one prayer protocol from this book per week and build your entire prayer meeting or church service around it. We have produced videos that correspond to ten of the chapters. You could show the video or give a brief explanation to those gathered to pray, and implement the protocol accordingly. Supply copies of this book to participants so they can read the designated chapter beforehand. The REFLECTION and APPLICATION section at the end of each chapter provide excellent discussion starters for your group.



Looking for a tool to assist in transforming the prayer culture in your church?

Check out *APPROACHING GOD'S THRONE: BIBLICAL PROTOCOLS FOR PRAYER*. Implementing these Protocols can revitalize your prayer meeting, small group, or youth group. Learn more about the book and Video series by visiting our web site: www.ChristLifeMin.org

