

## Whatever Happened to Prayer Meetings?

Dr. Alexander Kurian

Corporate prayer has fallen into hard times. Spurgeon was right when he said that slothfulness in prayer is one of the first signs of God's absence from a church. George Verwer wrote years ago, "There is no lack of books on prayer, and most pastors preach on prayer every now and again. But if there is any doctrine to which we pay only lip service in our churches, it has to be the doctrine of prayer."<sup>i</sup> The prayer meeting is called "the powerhouse of the church." But it is the least attended and most neglected meeting, though we are eloquent about our theology of prayer. Hundreds of excuses are on the tip of our tongues to skip our church's prayer meeting. Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer said that to abandon prayer is to embrace atheism<sup>ii</sup>. Isn't that what too many churches have done today?

Although church is not a building, when the people of God gather, their meeting is sacred, for God is among them. The gathered church is God's house (1 Tim.3:15). God's intention is that His "**house shall be called a house of prayer**" (Isa.56:7). Instead, it has become "a house of music" and house of various other programs. Yes, we need to sing, preach and teach. But collectively seeking God in prayer ought to be a definite characteristic of our meetings. Other activities should not be considered more essential than prayer meetings. But that is exactly what is happening in many assemblies.

**Praying together was one of the essentials that defined church life.** "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers" (Acts 2:42). The church is a community, and prayer is something Luke emphasizes about church life<sup>iii</sup>. **Acts 2:42 summarizes the life of the early church involving four key areas** (the four essentials or the four pillars of the church). But realistically speaking, prayer meeting has become *optional*. There is no priority for it. The general mindset of many believers is that if we show up on Sunday morning, we are in good standing with the church and the Lord.

The "**cafeteria style**" church gathering has become very popular now. You can pick and choose according to your preference and convenience which meetings you want to attend, and the prayer meeting is seldom included in the list. We can't help but see in the Book of Acts that corporate prayer was given the **highest priority by church leaders and believers**. They devoted themselves<sup>iv</sup> to all the four activities mentioned in Acts 2:42. The early church had no other strategy other than to come together, pray, and wait on God to act. They were not performing empty religious rituals. They wanted God to do something. It is through corporate prayer the church seeks God's direction, blessing and guidance. How can we neglect such great responsibility? "Why are we attracted only to special speakers and programs, rather than to the Lord Himself? What real authority does the Lord Jesus have in

our churches today? What authority does He have in your life and mine if we do not give top priority to meeting regularly with His people to pray?”<sup>v</sup>

A biblical understanding and practice of prayer is one thing that marks out a healthy church<sup>vi</sup>. The very words of the Disciples’ Prayer encourage **corporate petition**: “Our Father.... give us.... forgive us.... lead us...deliver us” (Matt.6:9-13). Christ gave a special promise of efficacy for the united prayers of His people (Matt.18:19-20). The word for “agree” (Matt. 18:19) in the Greek is the word *symphoneo*, which means “in one accord” or “to be in harmony together,” and it is where we get our word “symphony.” The prayer meeting is where the church gathers together, praying over the needs of the church with the promise of Christ’s blessing. Corporate prayers unify and edify us, knitting us together in a unique bond of fellowship.

**Our prayer list should be more than a hospital report and a list of our wants.** Though we claim not to believe in prosperity theology, our prayer meetings usually center around health, wealth and prosperity and nothing more. The prayers of Apostle Paul teach us to pray primarily for our **spiritual needs**. The prayer Jesus taught His disciples as a model prayer has only one petition for material needs – “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt.6:11), and that too for the basic needs of each day. When Jesus saw the multitude like sheep without a shepherd, He told His disciples to pray for laborers, for the harvest was great and the laborers few (Matt.9:35-38). When was the last time you prayed for this need in your church?

Though we can pray for all our needs, **the corporate prayer of the church should be evangelistic praying (1 Tim.2:1-8)**. The church must understand the importance of its evangelistic mission and the role of prayer in fulfilling it. The church should pray for civil authorities, that there might be peace, law, and order so that the proclamation of the gospel may have its free course and not be hindered by turmoil and civil unrest (1 Tim.2:2). Prayer must be lifted up for all kinds of people (prayer for the lost), because there is only one God and one mediator (1 Tim.2:4-5). These aren’t throwaway words. 1 Timothy 2 gives us explicit guidelines for the corporate prayer of the church.

Improving the quality of prayer meetings is the responsibility of the elders in consideration of the needs of the congregation. We can learn from the exemplary models of prayer meetings in other churches. Logistics in relation to time, day, format, schedule and other practical matters should be prayerfully evaluated and considered, and appropriate changes must be made if necessary. We may have to do away with the mindset that “Wednesday evening” is as sacred and non-negotiable as the doctrine of the Virgin Birth!

The growing trend to attend meetings on-line/Zoom (post-covid phenomenon) has privatized Christianity. It breeds spiritual autonomy and weakens believers in faith. This trend has adversely affected prayer meetings. Throughout God’s Word, God Himself declares His church’s physical gatherings to be essential (Heb.10:25; Acts 2:42.). Neglect of corporate gatherings minimizes or even neglects the divine mandate regarding assembly meetings. Church leaders should never encourage this trend<sup>vii</sup>. The gathering of the church has always

been “in person.” We must always uphold the theology and practice of the gathered church, not zoom church or hybrid gatherings.

Elders of the churches must carefully take heed to the example of the apostles. “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4). As shepherds of the church, this should be the priority of elders. *Prayer* in Acts 6:4 is not about the apostles devoting themselves to *personal* prayer. Literally it reads “to *the* prayer and *the* ministry of the Word.” The article **the** before both prayer and ministry of the Word suggests that the apostles were not talking about their personal prayer or “quiet time” but rather about two essential ministries to the church where they have a vital involvement: (1) leading and guiding the church to pray (2) preaching the Word of God. **Their involvement in the corporate prayer of the church is no less essential than preaching.** They prioritized their role and responsibility. This reflects good leadership and stewardship.

**The elders are to be examples to the flock** (1 Peter 5:3). They were to be models whom their people could follow. What shall we say about the elders who have no time or priority to attend the prayer meetings of their church? If believers are to learn the importance of prayer meeting – and they should – then they need to see it modeled in their leaders.

“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..... The prayer meeting is the appointed place for the reception of power” (Spurgeon). Be committed to performing the most important ministry any believer can have: *You can pray*. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is.....” (Heb.10:25).

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<sup>i</sup> *Whatever Happened to the Prayer Meeting?* georgeverwer.com. This is a very challenging and convicting article with lot of practical suggestions.

<sup>ii</sup> Alec Motyer, *Psalms of the Day: A New Devotional Translation*, 246.

<sup>iii</sup> Of 85 NT occurrences, the verb “pray” (*proseuchomai*) appears 34 times in Luke-Acts, 16 of which are in Acts.

<sup>iv</sup> “Devoting themselves” has the idea of persistence or persevering in something. It speaks of the ongoing devotion that they have..... It echoes the unity of mind Luke describes in Acts 1:14. In these four ongoing activities, much of the basic work of the community appears” (Darrel Bock, *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT*, 149).

<sup>v</sup> George Verwer, *Whatever Happened to the Prayer Meeting?* georgeverwer.com

<sup>vi</sup> Mark Dever mentions prayer as one of the nine marks of a healthy church. See *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 227-249. Dever is not promoting church growth theories, but points to solid biblical principles for assessing and strengthening your church.

<sup>vii</sup> See my article, *The Importance of In-Person Gathering of the Church*, alexkurian.org.