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Prayer as a Strategic Weapon in Mission

Introduction

Ephesians 6:10–17 is a strong reminder that success in mission cannot be achieved by human efforts and stratagems only but by the power of God through prayer:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Unfortunately John Robb remarks that

for today's hyperactive missions leaders, apart from opening and closing meetings, saying grace at the table or as a special consolation in time of emergency or stress, prayer is most often treated as a harmless pastime rather than a strategic weapon. In our attitude we often relegate it to the likes of doting old ladies who have nothing better to do with the autumn time of life. Certainly for most missions leaders, prayer does not seem to be where the action is, otherwise wouldn't we be giving it far more attention in our busy lives? (1991:23)

It is regrettable that we can be so busy for God that we often have no time for him. When it comes to mission or ministry, Oswald Chambers reminds us that “the lasting value of our public service for God is measured by the depth of the intimacy of our private times of fellowship and oneness with Him. . . . Beware of anything that competes with your loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor of true devotion to Jesus is the service we do for Him” (n.d.: January 6, January 18).

Although there are several reasons why prayer should be considered the key ingredient in mission and ministry, only four reasons will be explored in this short article: (1) God is the prime mover of mission and ministry, (2) mission is a spiritual endeavor and as such, our weapons ought to be spiritual not primarily carnal and intellectual, (3) the exemplary prayer life of Jesus demonstrates the vital importance of prayer in mission and ministry, and (4) the reliance of the Early Church on the power of the Holy Spirit to break down barriers for the propagation of the gospel.

God, the Prime Mover in Mission and Ministry

Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent in *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* emphatically state that mission has its root in the divine initiative and character (2010:61). In tune with these authors, David Bosch also points out that “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God” (1991:390) because “it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church” (Moltmann 1977:64). As the originator of mission (Gen 3), “God often works both beyond and despite of the church to accomplish his redemptive plans” (Tennent 2010:58). On that basis, the specific and varied ways in which the church is privileged to participate in God’s mission “should never be conceptualized apart from the *missio dei*” (59). As a human agency in God’s mission, the Church must come to the full realization that the mission of God is participated in by prayerful and Spirit-led believers. In mission and ministry, prayer is not one of the options to explore for success. Prayer (asking God to show us what he expects of us as we join him in his mission) is the key ingredient for success. This being the case, one of the primary tasks of the Church and its leaders is to actively seek to discern and respond to the initiative of the Spirit who is guiding and empowering God’s redemptive mission. This is the pattern displayed in the ministry of the biblical prophets and apostles.

Rightly understood therefore, mission is primarily God’s prerogative. It is about God and his redemptive purposes and initiatives in the world,

totally apart from any actions, tasks, strategies, and initiative undertaken by the Church. In other words, “mission is far more about God and who He is than about us and what we do” (Tennent 2010:55). It is therefore essential to always consult God through prayer before anything is undertaken for him. Instead of spending countless hours in planning for mission and then asking God to bless our plans, we should fervently pray for God’s wisdom to see mission as he sees it and for open-mindedness to undertake mission as God would have even if that is contrary to our quest for orthodoxy. In mission, prayer should not be mainly about getting more people to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior but also about us being willing to do things God’s ways instead of ours. We need to heed the following admonition:

On their own, people achieve goals by their efficiency and ingenuity. With God on His mission, you must follow Kingdom principles to accomplish Kingdom purposes. Our ways may seem good to us. We may succeed in moderate achievements. When we try to do the work of God in our own ways, however, we will never see the mighty power of God in what we do, and the world will not see God revealing Himself to them. It is only by God’s power that people come to know and worship God. When God accomplishes His purposes in His way through us, people will come to know God. They will recognize that what has happened can only be explained by God. He will receive the Glory! (Blackaby and Willis 2009:76)

Mission and ministry belong to God. We therefore need to be dependent on God. Like King Jehoshaphat did, let us always turn to God saying, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you” (2 Chr 20:12). If we are sincere, he will reveal his will to us. Maybe God’s way will not be conventional to us just as Jehoshaphat was instructed to send his army to war with singing. But one thing is sure: Doing mission and ministry God’s way and with God’s power will accomplish his purposes.

Mission and Ministry as a Spiritual Endeavor

The second reason why prayer is an essential ingredient to success in mission and ministry is that mission is warfare. The Bible describes our world as including Satan and other demonic beings. Spiritual warfare is a reality that Jesus did not ignore in his ministry. He did not see Satan and demonic forces as myths and superstition. He saw these forces as real enemies from which people needed to be set free (Wagner 1996:119–136). Ellen White also asserts that no one “can doubt that satanic agencies are at work among men with increasing activity to distract and corrupt the

mind, and defile and destroy the body” (1909:143). The Bible therefore uses warfare terminology to describe our participation in the redemptive mission of God in the world. In Ephesians 6 Paul tells us that our engagement in mission is an engagement against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. He uses an imagery of an armor-clad Roman soldier to describe our battle with these evil spiritual forces, warning that we absolutely need divine power to demolish their strongholds.

The Bible also makes a connection between the prayers of God’s people and the occurrence of breakthroughs in the accomplishment of God’s purposes in the world. At the onset of the Exodus, it was the power of God through prayer that allowed Moses to be victorious over Pharaoh’s resistance to let the Israelites leave Egypt (Exod 3–17). It was the power of prayer that brought down the strongholds of Baal in the lives of the Israelites in 1 Kings 18. It was the power of prayer that saved Peter from early martyrdom (Acts 12:1–18). It is urgent also in our time that we transfer our dependence on human-made strategies to appeals to God through importunate prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also only what will give true success to our participation in God’s mission.

Jesus, the Example in Prayer for Mission and Ministry

Jesus left a lasting impact on his disciples through his life of constant prayer. It was his habit to commit his everyday ministry to his Father before engaging in it (Mark 1:35). Prayer was his weapon in ministry and mission. Ellen White beautifully depicts Jesus’ prayer life as follows:

No other life was ever so crowded with labor and responsibility as was that of Jesus; yet how often He was found in prayer! How constant was His communion with God! Again and again in the history of His earthly life are found records such as these: “Rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed. . . . In a life wholly devoted to the good of others, the Saviour found it necessary to withdraw from the thoroughfares of travel and from the throng that followed Him day after day. He must turn aside from a life of ceaseless activity and contact with human needs, to seek retirement and unbroken communion with His Father. As one with us, a sharer in our needs and weaknesses, He was wholly dependent upon God, and in the secret place of prayer He sought divine strength, that He might go forth braced for duty and trial. In a world of sin Jesus endured struggles and torture of soul. In communion with God He could unburden the sorrows that were crushing Him. Here He found comfort and joy. (1940:362)

Jesus did not reduce his time in prayer because he had more to do. His

busy schedule was the reason why he prayed more. To successfully connect humanity with God through mission and ministry, we cannot afford to ignore Jesus' example.

The Early Church's Reliance on the Holy Spirit through Prayer

Several Bible texts point out the complete reliance of the Early Church on the power of prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit for success in mission and ministry. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and his subsequent manifestations (Acts 10) resulted in an unprecedented missional structure in the Early Church. In Cornelius' house, Peter embarked on a long theological discourse covering many fundamental beliefs. But the Holy Spirit cut him short as if to tell him that God does not depend on our human preconceived means in his relentless work to reach those who desire to know him. While Cornelius needed Peter and his gospel to know the way to salvation, Peter and the Early Church needed Cornelius and his household's salvation experience to come to term with their preconceived view as to how God was supposed to carry out his mission.

A new chapter in Christian history was thus written in Cornelius' house and the Early Church understood that they were to make significant adjustments. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the Jewish Christians who previously had no regards for the Gentiles learned to welcome them into full fellowship as co-heirs of the kingdom of God. The Jerusalem Council concluded with: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us..." meaning that through prayer and many deliberations, the apostles understood the will of God through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They made way to the Holy Spirit and sided with what was good to him. Another example of the Early Church's submission to the will of the Holy Spirit is found in Acts 16:6-10. In this incidence Paul and his companions had to abandon their plans of preaching the gospel in the province of Asia in favor of the Holy Spirit wanting them to deliver the good news of salvation in Macedonia. They no doubt knew and obeyed the Holy Spirit because it was the Holy Spirit who led the process of their selection for mission. While the believers at Antioch were fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit asked them to "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

The 21st century church needs, more than anything else, to be receptive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This may mean making unapologetic room for new, creative, and even unorthodox missionary methods because the God of mission and ministry is unpredictable. As the church continues to offer earnest prayers for the outpouring of the latter rain, are we willing to make some unprecedented adjustments on how we have

been accustomed to understand ecclesiology and mission structures? Asking God to lead us in his mission means that we should be open to change rather than always favoring the status quo (Paulien, 2011).

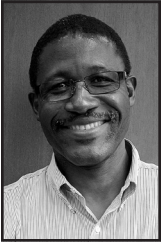
Conclusion

Because God is the Lord of mission, the Church is only a servant in mission. As such, the Church needs to always be reminded that the servant does not tell the Master what kind of assignment he/she needs nor does he/she have the free will to come up with his/her own assignment. The servant only waits on his/her Master for the assignment and the instructions to carry it out (Blackaby and Willis 2009:77). For Christians, there ought to be only one mission, and that is the mission of God (*missio Dei*). Mission is the initiative of the Triune God, rather than that of his Church. *Missiones ecclesiae* (what the Church does) is only its privileged participation in the *missio Dei*. In the light of *missio Dei*, the Church's mission should be continually renewed and reconceived (Bosch 1991:519). There is no better way to renew and reconceive our mission and ministry than through earnest prayer.

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