

VOL. 6 • NO. 2 • WINTER 2015 • 252–259

PRAYER: A KEY COMPONENT TO PLANTING OR REVITALIZING A CHURCH

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Abstract

This article examines prayer from a biblical and theological perspective as it relates to turning around or revitalizing declining or plateaued churches and offers practical insights into starting an intercessory prayer ministry at the local church.

INTRODUCTION

The church in America is failing. George G. Hunter III makes this shocking and condemning statement, “The United States, for instance, has at least 180 million functionally secular people who have never been substantially influenced by any serious versions of the Christian faith.”¹ In addition to the vast numbers of people who have not been influenced by serious Christianity, the secularization of the United States and the Western world has made it far more difficult to evangelize. Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in the Western world has more challenges than it does in many third world countries. Hunter recognizes the difficulties and states, “The Western world is now the toughest mission field on earth. There is now more resistance to the Christian faith in the heart of ‘ole Christendom than anywhere else—England, Europe, Scandinavia, Canada, Australia, and

¹ George G. Hunter III, *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2009), 1.

New Zealand.”² This fact is evident when looking at the number of churches in America. Although there has been a fifty percent increase in the number of churches in the United States from 212,000 in 1900 to 345,000 in 1995 according to the United States census, this has not kept up with population growth, which “has increased by 300 percent!”³ The failure of the church is very different from the proclamation of Jesus. Jesus declared that the church would be built on the fact that he (Jesus) was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁴ Jesus goes on to pronounce, “The gates of Hades will not overcome it.”⁵ The church is pictured as a mighty army taking over enemy territory, yet this is far from reality with the church in the United States.

The reversing of this trend is one of the most daunting challenges the church in America faces today. Plateaued and dying churches must be brought back to life. Growing churches must keep alive the vision of reaching the unreached for Jesus Christ. New churches must be planted in order to reach an ever-increasing diverse population. In a hurry to reverse the negative trends, the church *might* turn solely to the latest in church growth techniques. The church *might* make changes to the physical structure in order that the building becomes warm and inviting, with a great ambience. The church *might* change the organizational structure in order to operate more effectively and efficiently. The number of changes that the church *might* undergo in order to reverse the trend is useless, unless the Holy Spirit is at work. The church—for all that it is and does—is at its very core a spiritual entity; it is not truly a church without the work and presence of the Holy Spirit. I am not talking only about planting new churches, but this is applicable to all churches. Ed Stetzer states correctly, “Without the Holy Spirit’s work we are not planting churches; we are starting religious clubs.”⁶ The church needs to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit.

This article looks at the importance of prayer in the area of planting new churches and renewing plateaued and dying churches. First, this article will look at the biblical and theological foundations of prayer. The second focus of this article will be on implementing a prayer ministry in the local church.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

God has given humankind the ability to communicate with him. God has spoken to us in and through his Word (the Bible) “and nonverbally through

² George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1992), 24.

³ Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 7.

⁴ Matthew 16:16 NIV.

⁵ Matthew 16:18.

⁶ Stetzer, 77.

his obvious providence.⁷ Believers (the church) may address any person of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit—and the church may address the Triune Godhead. Throughout Scripture, the people of God offer up prayer with the expectation that God will answer. “Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.”⁸ This is only half of the equation. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign in the affairs of humans. “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.”⁹ From a cursory appearance, it seems that the sovereignty of God and efficacy of prayer are contradictory. How is it possible that God is sovereign, yet prayer can move God? The answer lies in the fact that “God ordains the means as well as the ends for His divine purposes. Prayer is a means God uses to bring His sovereignty to pass.”¹⁰ An amazing example of this is seen in the life of Elijah. Elijah told Ahab, “There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”¹¹ Three years later, Elijah defeats Ahab and his prophets at Mount Carmel and tells Ahab to have a celebration—rain is on the way.

The Scripture reads, “Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground, and put his face between his knees.”¹² Elijah prayed seven times before God sent rain, and it did rain.

God answers the prayer of people of His church. James states, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”¹³ In case there was any doubt, James offers a commentary on the passage in First Kings declaring, “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”¹⁴ God used the prayer of one of his followers to bring about God’s sovereign plan.

R.C. Sproul lists three requisites for proper prayer—sincerity, reverence, and humility. Sincerity in prayer is coming to God without deceit or hypocrisy. Jesus warns his people not to pray “like the hypocrites”¹⁵ or the pagans. The “hypocrite” is the person who prays for show. As Jesus puts it, these people “love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners

⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), 251.

⁸ Psalm 5:1–3.

⁹ Psalm 103:19.

¹⁰ Sproul, 251.

¹¹ 1 Kings 17:1.

¹² 1 Kings 18:42.

¹³ James 5:16.

¹⁴ James 5:17–18.

¹⁵ Matthew 6:5.

to be seen by men.”¹⁶ The appearance of prayer is enough for the hypocrite, but it is not the true intentions of prayer, which is connecting with the all-powerful King of the universe. The hypocrite has no expectation that God will supernaturally intervene; so praying for God to take action is a ritual but never a reality.

A second means of insincerity is repetition! This was the practice of the pagans. “And when you pray,” Jesus continued, “do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”¹⁷ Jesus is not concerned about the length or location of the prayer; he cares about the heart of the one who is praying.

Prayer must also be reverent. This is perhaps one of the more difficult areas for the Western church. The Western church has emphasized the approachability of God at the expense of the holiness of God. Pastors quote Romans 8:15, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. By him we cry, ‘Abba, Father;’¹⁸ but we forget the other side of the coin. When teaching his followers to pray, Jesus said, “This, then, is how you should pray: Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”¹⁹ Jesus recognizes the intimacy a believer has with God the Father, but not at the expense of recognizing the majesty of God or the rightful place of God. God is a great King and to address him “in a cavalier, casual, or flippant manner, as we might speak with our earthly friends, is to treat him with contempt of familiarity.”²⁰ Then Isaiah the prophet saw a vision of the majesty of God, and he exclaimed, “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’”²¹ God is approachable, but he must be approached with reverence and recognition of his supreme majesty.

Third, God must be approached in humility. When coming to God in prayer, one must remember his proper place. God is the Creator of all things, including humankind; it is not the other way around. God is all-powerful and sinless; his creation is not. The believer is to come to God in the way that God declares. On one occasion when Jesus was teaching his disciples on prayer, he compared two ways that people prayed. One prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a

¹⁶ Matthew 6:5.

¹⁷ Matthew 6:7.

¹⁸ Romans 8:15.

¹⁹ Matthew 6:9–13.

²⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), 261.

²¹ Isaiah 6:5.

tenth of all I get.”²² The other in humility simply said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”²³ According to Jesus, the second person went home forgiven by God, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”²⁴

God “invites us to come boldly before him, but never arrogantly.”²⁵ When churches come to God in prayer reverently, with a sincerity and humility asking that “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”²⁶ then God responds in power and brings growth to his church.

IMPLEMENTING A PRAYER MINISTRY

An effective prayer ministry in the church is perhaps the most difficult of all ministries to evaluate. Evaluating the effectiveness of evangelistic ministries is quite easy—how many people were led to Christ this week? This month? This year? The effectiveness of a prayer ministry is nearly impossible to quantify. The major problem is how does one look at the heart of those praying? Although there is great difficulty in quantifying the effectiveness of a prayer ministry, the values far outweigh the difficulties.

Prayer is vital to the church. It is the lifeblood of the church, and though “there is no simple formula for effective prayer,”²⁷ there are three basic biblical principles that the church must strive to achieve in the prayer life of the church. First, prayer is to be in accordance with the written Word of God.²⁸ God honors his Word. Jesus told his followers, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”²⁹ God’s Word will come to pass. When prayer is in line with his Word, God is honored and answers the prayer.

The second principle in prayer is a heart of humility.³⁰ A great example of this is Manasseh who was the king in Judah. Manasseh was not a godly king. His legacy is idolatry, murder, and captivity. However, when he humbled himself greatly before God, God answered his prayer and restored him. Following this, Manasseh started to reform the religious practice of the people to bring the practices in line with the teaching of the Law (2 Chronicles 33:12–19).

²² Luke 18:11–12.

²³ Luke 18:13.

²⁴ Luke 18:14.

²⁵ Sproul, 252.

²⁶ Matthew 6:10.

²⁷ Gary L. McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 90.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Matthew 5:18.

³⁰ McIntosh, 90.

The third principle in prayer is to pray in accordance with “God’s character.”³¹ God revealed his character to Moses saying, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet, he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”³² God’s character does not change; he desires that people would repent and enjoy a relationship with him. Praying with God’s character in mind strengthens prayer life.

Prayer Ministry

The first step in developing a biblical-centered, God-honoring prayer ministry begins with the leaders. The leadership of the church or the church plant must be one hundred percent committed to prayer as the lifeblood of the church. A church may hire a pastor whose sole responsibility is to create and foster a healthy prayer ministry. A church that takes this approach is sending a powerful message to the church body that prayer is important, just as children’s, youth, and worship ministries are important. However, the dangers in this approach are great.

First, the chance that people in the congregation will view prayer as a religious practice performed only by a professional is great. The pastor and staff spend countless hours each week praying for the hurts and needs of those in the congregation; this prayer burden should be shared with the laity.

Second, the possibility of a “silo” mentality is very likely. Pastors may stop praying for the lost and hurting in the community and the world because it is someone else’s job. Prayer ministry is not for the professional but for each member in the body of Christ.

A better way of showing leadership commitment to prayer ministry is for the leadership team to search for those in the congregation or their core team with a commitment and passion for prayer, and let them lead the prayer ministry. The leadership team can provide oversight and direction. Leadership, along with the prayer team, can develop useful measurements to determine the effectiveness of the prayer ministry. This might include keeping a visual record of all prayers made and answered. Another way leadership can show support to the prayer team is to ensure updates to the congregation, like they do with all other ministries.

Next, the pastoral and volunteer staff needs to take the following steps to make prayer a vital part of the ministry of the church. Making prayer a vital part of ministry is important for any comeback or turnaround church, since a church plant should have prayer as part of its DNA. The steps include first, a considerable length of time will be devoted at staff meetings for prayer

³¹ McIntosh, 91.

³² Exodus 34:6–7.

and praising God for answered prayers. Each staff member will take time praying for the needs of the community, praying for the lost (both here and abroad), and asking God to give each staff member a heart for the lost. This can also be a time of praising God for answers.

Second, each staff member will be encouraged to spend the first fifteen to thirty minutes of their workday in prayer and praise. This includes administrative as well as pastoral staff.

Third, have the elders commit themselves to prayer. Ask each elder to spend fifteen minutes a day (minimum) praying for the lost and the needs of the church and community, as well as remembering and praising God for answered prayers.

Fourth, give a list of items to each small group leader, and ask that they spend time as a group praying over these items. The items would be the needs of the local community, local church, the lost, and the larger church body here and abroad. Each small group leader will also report back when it is known that any of the prayers have been answered.

Fifth, each ministry area is to develop a quarterly prayer gathering that is age appropriate. The focus of the prayer gathering is to encourage people to pray for their community, the lost, and the world, and praise God for answered prayers.

Sixth, all new ministries must be birthed in prayer. This will be difficult to monitor, because most often, capable church staff are able to run ministries without leadership knowing if the pastoral staff are spending time in prayer; however, this still needs to be a priority.

The next step in developing a prayer ministry is talking to leaders and people in the church and asking them who are the people who pray for them. In a short time, the church will have developed a list of the prayer “warriors” in the church. From this list, an intercessory prayer team can be developed. For a church plant, an intercessory prayer ministry is the first and most important ministry of the new church. The direction and ministries of the church should flow from prayer. An example of this is found in the book of Acts at the church at Antioch. Scripture states, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”³³ The missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul were birthed in prayer.

CONCLUSION

Prayer is a foundational ministry in the church. Biblical believers (the church) are called by God to pray with the assurance that Jesus will answer. “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory

³³ Acts 13:2–3.

to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”³⁴ The church must pray for boldness and understanding “that the Christian church is no longer the first choice of those who are seeking a spiritual reality. We can no longer think of ourselves as the preferred source of truth.”³⁵

Secondly, the local church, both existing and new plants, must implement a thoughtful and dynamic prayer ministry. Strategy must be developed to engage the congregation or core group in order to make prayer part of the DNA of the local church. The church must learn to “not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”³⁶ Also knowing “we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”³⁷

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³⁴ John 14:13–14.

³⁵ Stetzer, 113.

³⁶ Philippians 4:5–7.

³⁷ 1 John 5:14–15.