

Written by Mark Bair 1989, revised 1994

The Priority of Prayer

The eyes of unbelief perceive only the absence of God. Yet Scripture as well as men and women of faith over the centuries have insisted that God *does* intervene in history and influence human affairs. Miracles can occur and God's goals are achieved by believers empowered by the Holy Spirit. What past Christians lacked in technique and information, they made up for with the conviction that God responds to prayer in mighty ways.

Scripture claims that such a thing exists as two-way, personal, intimate communication between the believer and the God of the universe. Not only will He hear us, but He will communicate and intervene in response to prayer. Prayer is the channel He has created to give us His gifts. The purpose of this paper is to expand our thinking on what is possible by learning how to pray more effectively.

The Difficulty of Prayer

Let's face it—prayer is not easy. Although the Bible paints no easy picture for the one who would take up the prayer task, our problems associated with praying often make us feel guilty and unspiritual. This whole area of our lives can become a source of shame and defeat. Yet these struggles are normal, as scripture and men of the testimony of men and women of God attest. The two principal sources of difficulty are:

1. Aversion From the flesh

Gal. 5:17 "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."

Rom. 8:7 "...because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so,

John Owen wrote:

There is no service for God which sin does not oppose. The more spirituality there is in a thing we do the greater is sin's opposition to it. Thus those who seek most for God experience the most opposition.¹

O. Hallesby concurs:

We shall have our sin natures with us as long as we live here on earth, and we must endure the discomfort occasioned thereby...The thing to remember is that our sin nature will not refuse *directly* to participate in prayer. If this were the case, our warfare against our flesh would be comparatively simple. On the contrary, the protest of our flesh is indirect...Instinctively and automatically it will mobilize all the reasons it can conceive of for not praying *now*.²

Prayer threatens our determination to be in control. Unlike the many activities of life where we are shaping things according to our will, prayer is an occasion for us to *be shaped by* Another. We sense that threat and sometimes retreat from prayer. Alister McGrath comments on this:

We experience two very different relations in life: an *I-It* relation (experience), in which we relate to something *passive* (such as a table), and an (2) an *I-You* relation, or *encounter*, in which we relate to something active (such as another person). In an *I-It* relation, we are always active, taking the initiative, so that we know more about the object in question. We always have the upper hand. But in an *I-You* relation, the situation is very different--because the other party to the relation is as active as we are, and may take the initiative away from us. While we are trying to find out about them, they may be trying to find out about us. God encounters us--He's not something passive which we experience like an object. God takes the initiative away from us, by determining where and in what manner he will disclose himself to us--*it is not something over which we have control*.³

2. Attack from the Devil

Eph. 6:12 *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."*

Again, Hallesby comments:

Most of us do not understand how prayer can involve difficulty and suffering. Why should our prayer life be a constantly flowing source of anguish?...it really cannot be otherwise. If prayer is, as we have seen, the central function of our life in God, it is obvious that our prayer life must become the target against which Satan directs his best and most numerous darts.

¹ John Owen, *Sin and Temptation* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1983) p. 18

² O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1931, 1975) p.88

³ Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1988) p. 137

This is not only Satan's most painless way of stealing our spiritual life; it is the quietest way which creates the least sensation... our disinclination to pray should not make us anxious or bewildered. [It confirms that we are at war]⁴

Most of us have been deeply influenced by our culture's aversion to choosing against feelings. Yet, this is exactly what we will have to do *much* of the time if we are going to develop a prayer life. Coupled with our difficulty with feeling states is our natural *legalism*. We need to get under the grace of God each time we attempt prayer. The devil fears a praying Christian, but he knows that accusation will keep many of us from praying--at least until we feel better.

A "Map" that puts prayer in focus: 4 Dimensions of Spirituality

In order to have a balanced and deeper understanding of prayer, we need to look at it in the overall context of the Christian life. We can generalize Christian spirituality into the following four aspects:

1. **Doctrinal-Bible Knowledge, the mental transformation (Rom.12:2; Jn.8:31,32; I Cor. 2:15,16; I Pet. 2:2)**
2. **Social-loving others, people orientation (Jn. 13:34,35; I Pet. 1:22; I Jn. 4:20,21; Phil.2:1-5)**
3. **Ethical-dealing with our sins, building character (Rom.6:12,13; 8:13; Gal. 5:16-25; Col. 3:5)**
4. **Experiential-our relationship with God, guidance and empowering of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14-16; Phil. 3:10; I Jn. 1:3,4; James 4:7)**

Prayer touches all four of these areas. We pray to *understand* God's truth and we understand the truth so we can pray better. Prayer that is not based on Biblical doctrine would be ineffective since God answers prayer that is according to His will (I Jn.5:14). Through prayer we seek God's wisdom as He illumines the Scriptures. Prayer also involves the *ethical* dimension. During prayer God will at times point out a moral deficiency in our life (Ps. 139:24,25). When we have known sin in our lives that we are unrepentant about, our prayer life begins to grind to a halt (I Pet. 3:7; I Jn. 2:9-11). Increasing *self-knowledge* should result as we cooperate with God in this. However, God does not merely expose our sin. Through prayer, He enables us to put on the new self.

As our moral strength and vision increases, we know more clearly *what* to pray for, as well as having greater fortitude. So, we pray for character change, and character change makes us better pray-ers.

⁴ Prayer, 87, 88

Since much of prayer is asking God to work in the lives of others, it involves the *social* dimension. This is why a self-focus hinders prayer so much. To be one who intercedes, we must have a passion or burden for people. At the same time, without prayer, our passion will wane. Genuine, sacrificial ministry will burn out a man or woman who does not pray regularly both for people and their own strength to carry on. Praying *with* others also gives prayer a social dimension. The *experiential* aspect of spirituality can be experienced in both corporate and personal prayer, but is not felt to the same degree at all times.⁵

By using the word "experiential," I am not implying that all spiritual experience is equally emotional, painless or ecstatic. Sometimes we experience conviction of sin or the personal discipline of God, which are both temporarily *sorrowful* (Heb.12:11). Paul spoke of times where he experienced the comfort of God *in the midst of affliction*, not instead of affliction (2 Cor. 1:3,4). He also described himself at times as being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." (2 Cor. 6:10). It would be true to say that experience is *never a basis* for spirituality, while also recognizing that confirming and comforting experiences will be a part of Biblical spirituality. Prayer is the arena where God is able to grant certain spiritual experiences as *He determines* that we need them. Prayer should never be seen as a means of demanding a "spiritual buzz."

Another helpful map: Shaeffer's 3 circles⁶

The 3 circles help to explain the dynamics that enable a believer to grow spiritually in such a way that life of God inside flows out to other people. Shaeffer was attempting to illustrate the proper order of things because he knew from personal experience the barrenness of trying to serve God without a quality relationship with God. The circles are numbered from important to most important:

#3 The *Apologetic*-the outer circle, the defense of the faith

#2 The *Intellectual*-more central than the apologetic is the positive statement of Christian doctrines.

Without contentful revelation, we would only have an unexplainable, mystical spirituality. But correct doctrine, the truth alone, is not enough. That would be dead orthodoxy.

⁵ Another way to describe the dimensions of Biblical spirituality is to say that God is working to teach us truth, transform our character, and equip us to love. All three of these processes are "experienced" in a personal way, involving both positive and negative emotions. Sometimes they are experienced with no particular emotion. The point is not so much what we felt, but that we have *understood truth, or grown in character, or extended ourselves in love* (or all three at the same time).

⁶ Lane Dennis, ed., *Letters of Francis Shaeffer* (Westchester, ILL: Crossway Books, 1985) p. 7-9,49

#1 The *Spiritual*-the innermost circle, the personal relationship of the individual soul with a personal God.

Without spiritual reality in the innermost circle, nothing we do will be of lasting value.

Shaeffer wrote to a friend: "And yet I see that a combat faith must *flow from* an ever closer walk with God and not take the place of it."⁷

As we study prayer, we are talking about this innermost circle. May his statement "a combat faith must *flow from* an ever closer walk with God and not take the place of it" be a warning and a helpful corrective against making our work for God a substitute for a living, personal relationship with God. It has become clear to me that a great deal of my Christian work has been a substitute for developing a more personal walk with God. I felt too busy to set aside time for prayer or even to learn more about it, or at other times thinking prayer was just an area I could never have victory in. Needless to say, the devil found it quite easy to accuse my heart and make me feel uneasy whenever the subject came up. Many people in our fellowship that I have spoken to relate similar stories. I believe such a relationship with God as Shaeffer describes will energize our work more than we ever have imagined. It certainly did in his work!⁸ Think of the increase in lasting fruit and satisfaction in our work for Christ!

Corporate and personal prayer are both vital

Some people prefer praying alone and are uncomfortable in group prayer, while others love prayer meetings but struggle to relate personally with God. Both types of prayer are crucial for spiritual growth because different things occur in each that are important. In group prayer, it is an opportunity to become unified with other members about important needs. Group prayer tends to help us focus more clearly on things that are according to God's will. When we pray out loud in a group we can inform the others of our needs as well as important burdens God has laid upon our own heart. I am merely affirming the biblical truth of the importance of each member of the Body of Christ (I Cor 12, Rom 12). If you have not prayed out loud in a group yet I encourage you to "break the ice" and see if that doesn't make a profound difference in your experience as a member of the body.

Personal prayer is vital because it is during these times that we can express ourselves personally to God and hear His replies. The Bible prescribes a moment by moment spontaneous relationship with God throughout our day. While praying with the body is very necessary, we cannot develop intimacy with God

⁷ *Letters of Francis Shaeffer*, p. 52

⁸ His personal spiritual journey is well documented in *The Letters* cited above, as well as in his wife Edith's book *L'abri*.

just through the stimulus of the group. Christ often retreated from His busy schedule to pray alone (see below). However, I would suggest praying with others as the place to begin if our prayer life is a trouble spot. This will provide the needed support to get going.

What is prayer?

Prayer is *not* a ritual or duty

If anything, prayer is the very antithesis, the very opposite of ritual. Ritual is an impersonal routine done under obligation. Paul calls it a form of being under law (Gal. 4:1-11). Christ taught not to pray in "meaningless repetition" as though many words or a repeated formula would make any difference. True prayer on the other hand is of the most personal, spontaneous nature. Some Christians I have known felt awkward about praying in their cars with their eyes open while driving because it seemed too informal. This reflects an uptight, rigid idea of prayer. Nor is true prayer a duty or a law, but rather a natural response to God initiating conversation with us. Consider the thoughts of O. Hallesby:

To pray is to let Christ come into our hearts. It is not our prayer which moves Jesus, but Jesus who moves us to pray...

Prayer is deeper than words. Prayer is a definite attitude of our hearts toward God. What attitude is it that God recognizes as prayer? I will mention two things. In the first place, helplessness...Prayer therefore consists simply in telling God day by day in what ways you feel you are helpless...Secondly, helplessness united with *faith* produces prayer. Without faith our helplessness would only be a vain cry of distress in the night.⁹

His thoughts are borne out by Scripture:

Rom. 8:26 *"And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words..."*

2 Cor. 3:5 *"Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God..."*

Eph. 3:20 *"Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us..."*

⁹ Prayer, p. 11, 16, 24, 27

Watchman Nee:

Prayer is none other than the act of the believer *working together with God*. It is the union of the believer's thought with the will of God...Prayer is not the expressing of our wish for God to yield to our petition and fill up our selfish desire. Before God, the believer asks in prayer for the *Lord's will to be done*.

This is not meant to imply that Christians should never ask the Lord to supply their needs. When you see that it *is* the Lord's will to supply your need, then you can ask Him to fulfill His will by supplying your need.¹⁰

Mt. 6:9-11 *"Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread...'"*

"Rebelling against the Status Quo"

What then is the nature of petitionary prayer? It is in essence rebellion--rebellion against the world in its fallenness, the absolute and undying refusal to accept as normal what is pervasively abnormal...Nothing destroys prayer like resignation. Jesus taught to pray at all times and to not lose heart, thereby acquiescing to what is (Luke 18:1)...To pray declares that God and this world are at cross purposes.¹¹

"Love at War"¹²

All of the thoughts above seem to capture the various dimensions of prayer in the Word of God. Clearly, much more is happening in the act of prayer than the performance of a ritual. We are communicating with the God of the universe! Not only that, but His interested in us! We also find that in our praying we are shaping history. We have the great privilege of working together with God to effect eternity!

To some of you, much of what has been said is review. My greater concern is that we are putting into practice what we know, that we take the implications of prayer to their logical conclusion. My opinion is that we as a fellowship need to place a higher priority on prayer both personally and in our prayer together. In what follows, I want to scope out the place of prayer in the ministry of Christ and Paul, as well as examples of prayer movements in history.

¹⁰ Watchman Nee, *Let us Pray* (New York: Christian Life Publishers, 1977) p. 3, 9

¹¹ David F. Wells, "Prayer: Rebelling against the Status Quo" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981) p. 124, 125

¹² David Bryant, "Obey the Vision Through Prayer", in *Perspectives*, p. 821

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I Tim. 2:1-4

"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Notice the phrase "first of all". I don't think Paul is making a superficial point like "always have the prayer part first when you have a church service". Rather he is getting at the primary importance of prayer in reaching people for Christ.

Prayer is *not the only thing* we do, but it is the *first thing* we must do if anything else worthwhile is to follow. It leads to strategic involvement...By its nature, prayer feeds a new work of God *before that effort becomes visible*, as a baby is fed in the womb for months before it is pushed out.¹³

Paul did not regard prayer as supplemental, but *fundamental*-not something to be added to his work, but the very matrix out of which his work was born. He was a man of action *because* he was a man of prayer.¹⁴

My concern is that we may have underestimated the role of prayer both in ministry and in our own personal spiritual growth. The ironic thing is that often feel we are "too busy to pray". That reflects what we believe is important, what we believe will make a difference. If we are too busy to pray, then we must believe that prayer does not make as much impact as the things we have time for. I suppose we would have time to pray if we thought it was a primary ingredient in the shaping of lives.

The example of Jesus

Mark 1:35 *"And in the early morning, while it was still dark, He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there."*

Luke 6:12 *"And it was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God. "*

¹³ David Bryant, *Concerts of Prayer* (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 1984) p. 43

¹⁴ J. Oswald Sanders, *Paul the Leader*, p.87

The example of Paul

Paul taught the importance of persevering prayer:

1 Thess. 5:16-18 Rejoice *always*; pray *without ceasing*; in *everything* give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Eph 6:18 With *all* prayer and petition pray at *all* times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with *all* perseverance and petition for *all* the saints

He practiced it:

Col. 1:9 "For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have *not ceased* to pray for you..."

1 Thess. 3:10 " as we *night and day keep praying* most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?"

2 Tim. 1:3 "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I *constantly remember you in my prayers night and day...*"

Historical and contemporary Examples-"Concerts of Prayer"

What is a concert of prayer?

Calling prayer a "concert" comes from Jesus' promise in Mat. 18:19,20: "*I tell you that if two or three of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.*" The word "agree" is the Greek word *sumphoneo* and literally means "to sound together." We get our word symphony from this Greek word--hence, when we "agree about anything we ask for," we are praying in concert to God.¹⁵

What is the purpose of a prayer concert?

A concert of prayer requires a balanced concentration on two major sweeps: (1) fullness in the body of Christ (revival, awakening) for (2) the fulfillment of His global cause (evangelization). Both sweeps create healthy tension.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 16

¹⁶ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 45

Richard Lovelace:

Renewal, revival, and awakening trace back to biblical metaphors for the infusion of spiritual life in Christian experience by the Holy Spirit. Usually, they are used synonymously for *broad-scale movements of the Holy spirit's work in renewing spiritual vitality to the church and in fostering its expansion in mission and evangelism.*¹⁷

Bryant's own definition of spiritual awakening:

When the Father wakes us up to see Christ's fullness in new ways, so that together we trust Him, love Him, and obey Him in new ways, so that we move with Him in new ways for the fulfillment of His global cause...Awakening is both a process and an event...in times of broader spiritual awakening, God *intensifies* the Church's relationship with Christ and He *accelerates* the advancement of Christ's kingdom through the Church.¹⁸

Bryant also refers to awakening as "a heavenly invasion", an "unveiling of Christ's presence in our midst". He then cites examples from the experience of John and Charles Wesley:

They spent extended periods of time in a prayer group of 60 Christians who met in the 1730's in London to pray for revival and missions. John Wesley records in his journal how God took charge of the prayer meeting on January 1, 1739: 'About 3:00 in the morning as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, inasmuch as many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground. As soon as we recovered from that awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty we broke out with one voice, "We praise You O God, we acknowledge You to be our Lord.' These men went on to lead great evangelism explosions in England as well as influencing the American Awakening.¹⁹

Jonathan Edwards describes what he saw during an awakening in his are in 1735 New England:

The work of conversion was carried out in an astonishing manner and increased more and more...the number of saints multiplied and soon made a glorious alteration in the town...the congregation was alive in God's service, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping for sorrow and distress, others for joy and love, others with concern and pity for the souls of their neighbors.²⁰

¹⁷ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 74

¹⁸ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 76, 77

¹⁹ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 78

²⁰ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 78

Bryant makes an excellent balancing point by warning us that not all of what seem to be "revivals" are legitimate:

If revival does not enhance God's glory and advance His kingdom, it needs to be questioned. Sometimes we can even shape revival into an idol and worship it...Revival is no shortcut to God's blessing; rather, it opens the door to the blessings and sufferings of being Christ's servant.²¹

Historical Examples

The Moravians (started in 1727)

Each of the 24 hours of the day was assigned to 24 men and women who prayed in pairs. This God-ordained prayer vigil lasted over 100 years! As a result, the community was revived with a desire to see the worldwide church awakened to its calling to world evangelization.

Within 12 years the Moravians, nicknamed the "Savior's happy people," established mission bases in the West Indies, Greenland, India, South Africa, Guinea, Ceylon and Turkey, as well as various parts of Europe and the New World. In the first 100 years they sent out over 2,150 missionaries.²²

New York City in 1857 (part of a national awakening)

Jeremiah Lamphier, a Manhattan businessman, sent out an invitation for people to join him at the Reformed Church on Fulton Street for a noontime prayer meeting for revival. At the first gathering, out of a population of one million, only six people showed up.

But gradually, the prayer meeting spread. By 1858, New York City alone had 6000 people involved in *daily* noon prayer meetings! Tens of thousands crowded into the churches for prayer in the evenings. Ten thousand a week were converted. In Chicago at the same time, almost 2000 gathered for an hour of prayer every noon.²³

Today in Korea

The whole church in Korea seems to be one big concerted prayer movement. Across the land thousands of individuals meet between 4:00 and 7:00 each morning before going off to work or household duties. In Seoul, pastor Yonggi Cho guides the largest church in the world, more than 400,000 members. Not only does he rise at 4:30 A.M. for an hour and a half of private prayer, but 15,000 of his members come together every week for concerted prayer that lasts from 10:30 P.M. Friday to 6:00 A.M. Saturday, while the rest meet in over 20,000 prayer cells around the city.²⁴

²¹ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 86

²² *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 103, 104

²³ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 105

²⁴ *Concerts of Prayer*, p. 48

What about us?

Are we biblical in our priorities here? Corporately and personally?

It seems from the above examples that we need to develop more fiber in our prayer lives. There seems to be a sure connection between time in prayer and a harvest of souls. When you compare prayer with other areas of the Christian life that are structured into your time as habits, what do you see? We have study time and fellowship time and ministry time and marriage time worked into our schedule, but is prayer worked in? Do we read books about prayer? For most of My Christian life, I have read "more practical books." Since reading several good prayer works lately, I found they are very practical. If spiritual vision means anything to a ministry, we must find literature that will keep that vision fresh by keeping our prayer life fresh.

It occurred to me this summer (1989) that when I prepare for a teaching, most of the time spent is mental— studying. Then a little prayer was attached after I studied. I realized that I believed more in my efforts to explain a passage than I did in effects of thorough prayer for my spiritual state as I teach, as well as God's work among those that listen. I also noticed that I would rather talk with a disciple and give him advice than pray with him. Here again, I must believe my words to them have more weight than the effect of going to God with that person.

Andrew Murray's analysis of prayerlessness:²⁵

According to Andrew Murray a feeble prayer life is merely a *symptom* of a feeble spiritual life. This reveals our tendency to "live after the flesh" even in our ministry work. Until we confess that our lack of prayer is sin and inexcusable, we will not see spiritual power unleashed through us as God intends.

Furthermore, vows and promises to "try harder" and make more time will result in further failure. In the area of prayer, just as in all areas of spirituality, we must fall dependently upon Christ as our only hope to learn how to pray and as our sustainer in prayer. This is a refreshing point for anyone who feels as though prayer is something we have to generate from within ourselves.

²⁵ Andrew Murray, *The Prayer Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988) chapters 1-3

Proposals

Personally

1. Read literature on prayer and the spiritual life. Some has been suggested on another handout called "Reviews of Various Books on Prayer". We can use our strength (study and reading) to deal with our weakness.
2. Set aside time with the Lord. Some people have found it helpful to keep a prayer journal with requests as well as answers to prayer. Others prefer to go on walks without being tied to any formal list. The point is try to step back from things, daily if possible, to gain the Lord's perspective and His strength.

Corporately

1. Be part of a prayer group. This can be small or big, weekly or monthly. The key is that we commit time on a regular basis. Otherwise, we will feel "too busy to pray". I think we would do well to establish a monthly fellowship wide prayer meeting.
2. Initiate spontaneous times of prayer with others. Everybody feels a little strange bringing it up, but usually people will respond positively.

Conclusion

Charles Spurgeon sums up well what has been said in this paper:

In due time the weeping intercessor will become the rejoicing winner of souls. There is a distinct connection between agonizing and true success. My brethren, let me beseech you to be men of prayer. Great gifts you may never have, but you will do well enough without them if you abound in intercession.

The worker who does not pray earnestly over his work must surely be a vain and conceited man. He acts as though he were sufficient in himself.

There is something in the very tone of a person who has been with Christ which has more power to reach the heart than the most perfect oratory: remember this and maintain an unbroken walk with God. You will need much night work in secret if you are to gather in many of the Lord's lost sheep.²⁶

²⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, p.60