

Discipling Your People into Prayer

By Jonathan Graf

A number of years ago I was an elder in a church. I recall one elder's meeting where at the start of the meeting our pastor encouraged us to pray for areas of spiritual need in our lives or in the congregation. I was shocked at the response, only the pastor and I followed the instructions. The other elders all prayed for some kind of physical need—one his mother-in-law's health, the others similar health issues in their families.

I thought the directions were pretty clear, so I wondered why they were unable to pray about those issues?

Our pastor encouraged this same group a while later to come to a weekly early-morning prayer time (we opened it to others in the church as well). The focus would be on God's moving in our midst, the power of His Spirit being unleashed among us. I was in!

The first week there were seven or eight there. The pastor re-emphasized the focus. For about 30 minutes we stayed on task well. Then someone prayed for our troops (we had just gone into Afghanistan). Nothing was said about the focus shift. The next week we stayed on task for about 15 minutes before people started praying their own agendas. Again, nothing was said. The third week, we started off topic right away. Within a few more weeks the prayer meeting began to dissolve as people stopped coming.

As I thought back on those things, it was clear that many of those people had never been disciplined into prayer beyond

simple petition or intercession for our immediate needs. They simply did not have the tools to pray beyond simple fix it prayers.

In the period I grew up in the church (1960s-1980s) there was a huge emphasis on discipleship. Resources and emphasis on Bible knowledge was significant. Churches had multiple times during the week when the Bible was taught. It was during this era that many churches in the west abandoned their weekly prayer meetings in favor of "Family Night" where they had a full orbed program for all ages to gain Bible knowledge. I am amazed that we did not see better results from that in the Church.

But in almost all churches one key area of discipleship was totally ignored. Prayer. There was very little discipleship in prayer. I think it was assumed that prayer development would happen naturally. "Prayer is caught, not taught" was a popular phrase. Yet churches offered few places for it to be caught.

Development in prayer does not happen naturally in most people. It needs to be both caught and taught. Churches that recognize this will begin to look for ways to disciple their people in prayer at all levels.

Here are some things to consider as you seek to better disciple your people:

We pray what we know.

From the youngest child to the oldest adult, we cannot pray out of our sphere of knowledge. When a parent is teaching a young child how to pray, the child usually prays for Mommy, Daddy, siblings, grandparents, pets—things that are in their immediate area of knowledge. But then they add a friend, a neighbor, a pastor. Good Sunday school teachers or parents add the lost to their list, maybe a nation of the world or a

missionary.

Adults are like this too. When we start out praying, we start with our immediate sphere of knowledge too—our needs (Petition). If we are not taught to pray beyond that, we do not progress. Adults then need to put themselves in places where they hear other things being prayed for (intercession, spiritual growth, spiritual warfare). It is by hearing someone in church pray for a nation, or community transformation, that they will begin to add those things. This all comes from discipleship.

Can you see what happens if the only prayer time a church ever has in a worship service focuses on people's needs? Yes. They will grow believers who think that is all prayer is for—fix my life.

Church leaders need to look for ways to enlarge their people's prayer agenda and experiences. That should be a part of the planned discipleship agenda of a church. Church CE people need to make it a part of planning and instructing teachers how to teach praying beyond those things in their classes. Youth leaders and Men's and Women's group leaders need to do the same.

We all pray differently.

One of the things that needs to be better understood in prayer discipleship is that we all do not pray the same way. Our personalities and character traits . . . and our spiritual gifts shape the way we pray.

For example, a person with the spiritual gift of helps or mercy may get excited praying for the needs of people. They will come to a prayer time that is focused on members' needs. But a person with a gift of evangelism will be bored to tears in such a prayer meeting. He or she wants to pray for the

lost, for community transformation.

And then there is the fact that God gives many people a specific burden in prayer. Some in your congregation will eventually have a burden to pray for children, for their pastor, for the nation, for a missionary and so on.

Churches that try to cookie cutter prayer will only bless a few people. A church that wants to disciple its people well into prayer will consider this truth. That church will look for a variety of ways it does public prayer. It will look for ways to stimulate prayer burdens and personalities of its members.

Some in your congregation will value prayer as relationship, while others will be intercessors who believe prayer releases the will of God and expands His kingdom.

The problem with all of this is twofold. First you will have issues with people who insist that their style or burden should be everyone's. So all need to pray for missions. Or everyone needs to focus on having 30 minutes of prayer first thing in the morning. Second, it can be a challenge for church leaders to provide for everyone.

The first problem can simply be solved with gentle correction. The second problem is ongoing, but a church can handle it effectively if they simply remember the truth and do not always do prayer the same way. Shake it up in your morning worship services. Make an effort to put various prayer opportunities in front of your people. Provide information on various days of prayer, make prayer guides on different subjects available to your people.

Teach Praying Scripture.

While there are lots of ways to pray, I personally believe the

absolute bedrock method of prayer that everyone should learn to do—even if it doesn't become a primary method for them—is to learn to pray Scripture. Every person in our pews needs to learn how to take verses of scripture and turn it back into a prayer to the Father.

This is highly important for several reasons. First we know we need to pray God's will if we are going to see answers. Praying God's will is not always easy, especially when we do not know what God's will is in a situation. But we also know that what is in God's Word is God's will! If I can pray a verse over a situation when I know that verse is God's will, then my faith and expectation rises.

Second, it will get your men praying more effectively. One of the biggest hindrances to prayer in men is that they do not know what to say. Men are typically less verbal than women. I know that is a generalization, but it is largely true. I find that fewer men will pray in public than women. If you teach men to pray scripture, this will not happen. Men are given a language to use when they pray out loud. You will see results.

Theology They Need

A lot of people in our pews struggle because they do not have a good theology of prayer. They do not understand how prayer works, how they should engage in it, and many have little expectation that it will work.

People need to be disciple effectively to understand the two primary purposes for prayer:

1. Prayer grows a personal relationship with God.
2. Prayer releases the will of God on earth.

Whether you are from a Calvinist or Arminian background

theologically, you need to explain those two purposes in your theological bent and jargon.

First, people need to understand the importance of prayer in growing their relationship with God. Prayer is the avenue for us to know God personally. When we have a prayer life (no matter if it is a struggling one), we have a point of connection with God. As a result, God is able to conform us to His image. He works in our hearts to shape us and mold us. When a believer does not have a prayer life he or she is working on, than God is very inactive in their life. Those people will not make good parishoners for the kingdom work of a church.

The second point is also very important if you want to see your church members active in the Kingdom. No one will pray for much outside their own personal needs if they do not understand that our prayers are a part of moving the hand of God. A church that teaches its people this principle, will see kingdom results.

A word to Calvinists here. Notice I did not say prayer dictates the will of God, it releases it. When we pray what is on God's heart, what He puts within our hearts, it happens! And that is how He uses us to grow the Kingdom. I like to use this illustration to help explain it:

Imagine a picture of our hand opening representing God's will being released. Our prayers are the muscles and tendons in the arm. But God is the brain. What's opening the hand? The brain sends impulses to the arm so the muscles and tendons move in a way that opens the hand. That is the wonderful way God uses us to help grow His kingdom.

An understanding of both principles is crucial to disciple a person into effective prayer. Those two principles work together. As we grow in relationship, we get a greater desire to pray what is on God's heart, rather than what we want. The

more Christlike we become, the quicker our heart—and what we pray—seeks to pray what will grow the Kingdom.

Conclusion

Any church that wants to become a prayer force needs to consider how it can better disciple its people in prayer. Focusing on these four areas will begin to develop your congregation into not only a strong praying force, but will make them better Kingdom-minded believers in the process.



Jonathan Graf is the publisher of Prayer Connect, and the president of the Church Prayer Leaders Network. This article is taken from *Restored Power: Becoming a Praying Church One Tweak at a Time* by Jonathan Graf. Restored Power is an important read for anyone in church leadership. [Click here](#) for more information.