

The Importance of Prayer in Acts

(and in Your Church, Too)

By Jonathan Graf

Imagine the situation. Jerusalem is absolutely abuzz. All of a sudden on one day, more than 3,000 people started following a new way—following Jesus Christ, a person that had been killed, but who, rumor had it, came alive again.

His followers—mostly common folk—were clearly shaking up the city. That 3,000 followers of Christ that day probably represented 10 percent or so of the city's population! Every day they came to the Temple to teach. Every day brought more individuals who believed the message—around 5,000 by Acts 4:4.

The religious leaders were absolutely incensed at this. *We must do something to stop the spread of this cult*, they thought. Then there came a very visible display of power in front of everyone at the Temple. A man who was crippled from birth was healed by Peter and John. That was the last straw for the religious leaders.

So later that day, while Peter and John were teaching to a crowd, they sent Temple police to arrest them. The police dragged Peter and John off in front of the people, had them beaten and thrown into prison. Because it was late in the day, the leaders could not pull a Tribunal together, so they let them sit in jail overnight.

The next morning they bring Peter and John in front of the high priest and synagogue leaders. They were threatened with their lives and commanded never to speak of this Jesus again.

But because of the people, they let them go.

Peter and John head back to their group of fellow believers. They need to pray about this threat. But what should they pray?

That is the first story in Acts where we see a specific use of prayer in the early church. They were facing the first significant threat to the spread of the gospel.

Think about that for a moment. If that had happened to us, Western church leaders, what would we have prayed in that situation? I suspect that many of you—and our church—would pray this way: “Get me out of this.” Or “Intervene Lord, remove these evil men from office.” Or perhaps, “Lord, change their hearts.” My mind would immediately go to praying a fix-it prayer, a change this situation prayer.

But what did these guys pray?

Acts 4:23-30 records their prayer:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

*“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.*

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire

against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Instead of focusing prayer on changing the situation, they chose the kingdom-expansion approach. They prayed a different way than the modern church would have prayed.

What did the early church pray about?

As I look at the roll of prayer in Acts and its practice in the Church I see not only that they recognized the importance of and emphasized prayer far more than we do, but they also focused prayer on different things than the things on which Western churches typically focus prayer. I truly believe if we could get the focus of our prayers correct, the emphasis and importance would naturally follow.

Kingdom over Comfort

In this passage from Acts, we clearly see a situation where it would have been easy to ask for protection, escape, change in the situation. But these early followers didn't even hint at those outcomes. “Now, Lord,” they prayed, “consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

The very thing that got them into trouble—a visible miracle—they ask for more of them. “Give us the enablement we

need to proclaim your Word," they asked. "And let signs and wonders follow!" There was no thought of shrinking back, no "remove these evil men from office." It was only forward moving, kingdom-first focused.

Today in our churches, particularly in the Western world, we use prayer as a fix-it tool. Make our lives better. Something comes along in someone's life that is uncomfortable, and the immediate way we pray is "get them back to status quo."

Over the past 40 years or so, a huge myth about prayer has been perpetuated over and over again in our churches. Prayer is to make our life good. Unless that myth can be exposed and corrected in a congregation, it will be difficult to move forward in prayer.

Fruit-Bearing Prayer

If we want to see our churches truly do something for the Kingdom, and grow kingdom-minded, kingdom-committed followers, then we need to help shift the focus of their prayers from fix-it to fruit-bearing.

John 15 has the most amazing prayer promise in Scripture: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (v. 7). It is a powerful truth, but often taken out of context.

John 15 of course is the illustration of Christ being the Vine, God the Father is the Gardener, and we are the branches. To be healthy branches we have to stay attached to the Vine. We have to draw all of our sustenance for life from the Vine. We do that by reading His Word and by connecting in prayer.

The passage also says that our role as branches is *to bear fruit*. "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. . . . Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must

remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (vv. 2-4).

After all of this foundation, we come to verse 7 and our prayer promise. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . .” we will get what we want. But if a believer is truly connected to the Vine, taking in the Word, and realizing that their primary purpose as a believer is to bear fruit, what will they want? Likely, instead of praying the possibly selfish fix-this-situation prayer, they will think, *What’s the fruit-bearing thing I should ask for? What does the Vine want me to pray for? What could I pray for—myself, this person, my church—that would bring Kingdom results, where God would get the glory and the Kingdom would grow?*

If you can encourage this one shift in prayer—helping people to understand that the primary purpose of prayer is not to make my life better—you will ultimately see radical changes in the kingdom ministry of your church.

Don’t Perpetuate This Practice

It is not difficult to teach this principle. Though if you do not continue to encourage this type of praying, even if people learn the principle in their heads, their hearts will often take them right back to “make my life better.” And it’s not as if God does not want to “give good gifts to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:13).

But beyond teaching, one of the things we need to do is be careful we do not perpetuate this practice. And we often do that in several ways.

Default mode. As leaders we want to encourage and minister comfort to our people. When we are asked to pray for a need in someone’s life, this “pastoral” mode often kicks in. Rather than seek direction from the Holy Spirit before praying out of default, we quickly pray for whatever the need calls for to be

fixed. Instead, we should seek to pray a meaningful, sensitive, spirit driven prayer that seeks what God desires to do in the situation.

Sameness in our practice. Because of our desire to minister in a caring way to our people, many churches (especially smaller ones) have a time to pray for needs in a service. Some even call for public requests before a prayer is offered. Other churches have prayer ministry teams set up in the front of a church during a point in a service, and people can come up to them for personal prayer over their need. Both are loving acts of ministry. But if those things are the only public prayer practices in your church, they perpetuate the myth that pray is a fix-it tool. It is okay to do these things in a service, but make sure you have an equal amount of other prayer experiences in a service as well—experiences that teach people to pray outside of themselves and their needs.

Never model other ways to pray. Sameness is the easiest thing to do. Because of this, many churches have do the same thing, at the same time, service after service. If you want to move people into a more “Acts-like” experience of prayer, you can’t be stuck in sameness! There are many creative ways to model ways of praying in your services other than just covering needs in a fix-them way. You need to regularly have prayer that seeks Kingdom growth and advancement, that seeks God’s Presence instead of His hand.

Conclusion

It is clear that the early church prayed! It also seems clear that they focused on kingdom growth rather than their own comfort. As you consider how to become a praying church, one of the most significant things you can tweak is to make a shift from focusing on fix-it prayers to outward praying. That shift is not as hard as it might seem. Simply relooking at what public prayer practices you offer your people and simply pausing before you pray for someone and asking the Holy Spirit

what to pray, might be all you have to do.

–Jonathan Graf is the president of Church Prayer Leaders Network and the publisher of PrayerShop Publishing. This article is adapted from his book, *Restored Power: Becoming a Praying Church One Tweak at a Time*.