

ARE WE PREPARED TO PRAY THE PRICE TO SEE GOD MOVE IN OUR NATION?

by Stuart Robinson. At the time of writing this article The Rev Dr Stuart Robinson was the Senior Pastor at the Blackburn Baptist Church in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Luke 11:1 Lord teach us to pray

Introduction

In 1952 Albert Einstein was asked by a Princeton doctoral student what was left in the world for original dissertation research? Einstein replied, 'Find out about prayer'. English preacher Sidlow Baxter, when he was eightyfive years of age, said, 'I have pastored only three churches in my more than sixty years of ministry. We had revival in every one. And not one of them came as a result of my preaching. They came as a result of the membership entering into a covenant to pray until revival came. And it did come, every time' (Willhite 1988:111).

Chaplain of the United States Senate, Richard Halverson, advised that we really don't have any alternatives to prayer. He says, 'You can organise until you are exhausted. You can plan, program and subsidise all your plans. But if you fail to pray, it is a waste of time. Prayer is not optional. It is mandatory. Not to pray is to disobey God' (Bryant 1984:39). Roy Pointer, after extensive research in Baptist churches in the United Kingdom, arrived at the conclusion that wherever there was positive growth, there was one recurring factor: they were all praying churches.

In the United States of America, at Larry Lea's Church on the Rock in Rockwall, Texas, numerical growth was from 13 people in 1980 to 11,000 people by 1988. When he was asked about such amazing growth, he said 'I didn't start a church I started a prayer meeting'. When David Shibley, the minister responsible for prayer in that church was asked the secret of the church, he said, 'The evangelistic program of our church is the daily prayer meeting. Every morning, Monday through Friday, we meet at 5.00 am to pray. If we see the harvest of conversions fall off for more than a week, we see that as a spiritual red alert and seek the Lord' (Shibley 1985:7).

In Korea, where the church has grown from almost zero to a projected 50% of the entire population in this century alone, Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho attributes his church's conversion rate of 12,000 people per month as primarily due to ceaseless prayer. In Korea it is normal for church members to go to bed early so they can arise at 4.00 am to participate in united prayer. It is normal for them to pray all through Friday nights. It is normal to go out to prayer retreats. Cho says that any church might see this sort of phenomenal growth if they are prepared to 'pray the price,' to 'pray and obey.'

Cho was once asked by a local pastor why was it that Cho's church membership was 750,000 and his was only 3,000 when he was better educated, preached better sermons and even had a foreign wife? Cho inquired, 'How much do you pray?' The pastor said, 'Thirty minutes a day.' To which Cho replied, 'There is your answer. I pray from three to five hours per day.' In America one survey has shown that pastors on average pray 22 minutes per day. In mainline churches, it is less than that. In Japan they pray 44 minutes a day, Korea 90 minutes a day, and China 120 minutes a day. It's not surprising that the growth rate of churches in those countries is directly proportional to the amount of time pastors are spending in prayer.

Growth a Supernatural Process

The church is a living organism. It is God's creation with Jesus Christ as its head (Colossians 1:18). From Him life flows (John 14:6). We have a responsibility to cooperate with God (1Corinthians 3:6). We know that unless the Lord builds the house we labour in vain (Psalm 127:1). The transfer of a soul from the kingdom of darkness to that of light is a spiritual, supernatural process (Colossians 1:14). It is the Father who draws (John 6:44). It is the Holy Spirit who convicts (John 16:811). He

causes confession to be made (1 Corinthians 12:3). He completes conversion (Titus 3:5). It is the Holy Spirit who also strengthens and empowers (Ephesians 3:16). He guides into truth (John 16:16). He gives spiritual gifts which promote unity (1 Corinthians 12:25), building up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12), thus avoiding disunity and strife which stunt growth.

This is fundamental spiritual truth accepted and believed by all Christians. However, the degree to which we are convinced that all real growth is ultimately a supernatural process and are prepared to act upon that belief, will be directly reflected in the priority that we give to corporate and personal prayer in the life of the church. It is only when we begin to see that nothing that matters will occur except in answer to prayer that prayer will become more than an optional program for the faithful few, and instead it will become the driving force of our churches. Obviously God wants our pastors, other leaders and His people to recognise that only He can do extraordinary things. When we accept that simple premise, we may begin to pray.

In the Bible

The battle which Joshua won, as recorded in Exodus 17:8-13, was not so dependent upon what he and his troops were doing down on the plain. It was directly dependent upon Moses' prayerful intercession from on top of a nearby hill, with the support of Aaron and Hur. In the Old Testament, not counting the Psalms, there are 77 explicit references to prayer. The pace quickens in the New Testament. There are 94 references alone which relate directly to Jesus and prayer. The apostles picked up this theme and practice.

So Paul says, 'Pray continually, for this is God's will for you' (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Peter urges believers to be 'clear minded and self controlled' so that they can pray (1 Peter 4:7). James declares that prayer is 'powerful and effective' (James 5:16). John assures us that 'God hears and answers' (1 John 5:15). In the book of Acts there are 36 references to the church growing. Fiftyeight percent (i.e. 21 of those instances) are within the context of prayer. We would all love to see growth in every church in the world like it was at Pentecost and immediately thereafter. The key to what happened there is found in Acts 1:14 when it says: 'They were all joined together constantly in prayer.'

They were all joined together one mind, one purpose, one accord. That is the prerequisite for effectiveness. Then, they were all joined together constantly in prayer. The word used there means to be 'busily engaged in, to be devoted to, to persist in adhering to a thing, to intently attend to it.' And it is in the form of a present participle. It means that the practice was continued ceaselessly. The same word and part of speech is used in Acts 2:42: 'They devoted themselves... to prayer.' Over in Colossians 4:2, Paul uses the same word again in the imperative form: 'Devote yourselves to prayer.' Most significant expansion movements of the church through its history took up that imperative.

In History

When we read the biographies of William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, or whomever, the initiating thrust of the work of their lives began in prayer encounters. About a century ago, John R. Mott led an extraordinary movement which became known as the Student Christian Movement. It was based amongst college and university students. It supplied 20,000 career missionaries in the space of thirty years. John Mott said that the source of this amazing awakening lay in united intercessory prayer. It wasn't just that these missionaries were recruited and sent out in prayer; their work was also sustained through prayer.

Hudson Taylor told a story of a missionary couple who were in charge of ten stations. They wrote to their home secretary confessing their absolute lack of progress, and they urged the secretary to find intercessors for each station. After a while, in seven of those stations, opposition melted, spiritual revival broke out and the churches grew strongly. But in three there was no change. When they returned home on their next furlough, the secretary cleared up the mystery. He had succeeded in getting intercessors for only seven of the ten stations. S. D. Gordon (1983:40) concludes, 'The greatest thing anyone can do for God and man is to pray.'

Luther, Calvin, Knox, Latimer, Finney, Moody, all the 'greats of God' practised prayer and fasting to enhance ministry effectiveness. John Wesley was so impressed by such precedents that he would not even ordain a person to ministry unless he agreed to fast at least until 4.00 pm each Wednesday and Friday. Yonggi Cho (1984:103) says, 'Normally I teach new believers to fast for three days. Once they have become accustomed to threeday fasts, they will be able to fast for a period of seven days. Then they will move to tenday fasts. Some have even gone for forty days.'

These people seem to have latched onto something which we here in Australia hardly know anything about. We are so busy, so active. We try so hard to get something good up and running. But it doesn't seem to grow much, or permanently change many lives. Why? Is it that the ground in Australia is too hard? Compared with other times and places, this could hardly be so. For example, back in the 18th century things didn't look good.

Eighteenth Century

France was working through its bloody revolution, as terroristic as any of our modern era. America had declared its Rights of Man in 1776. Voltaire was preaching that the church was only a system of oppression for the human spirit. Karl Marx would later agree. A new morality had arisen. Amongst both sexes in all ranks of society, Christianity was held in almost universal contempt. Demonic forces seemed to have been unleashed to drive the church out of existence. In many places it was almost down and out. Preachers and people would be pelted with stones and coal in places in England if they dared to testify to Jesus Christ in public.

But even before those satanic forces collaborated to confound and confuse, it appears that the Holy Spirit had prepared His defence, like a plot out of some Peretti novel. In the 1740s, John Erskine of Edinburgh published a pamphlet encouraging people to pray for Scotland and elsewhere. Over in America, the challenge was picked up by Jonathan Edwards, who wrote a treatise called, 'A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom.'

For forty years, John Erskine orchestrated what became a Concert of Prayer through voluminous correspondence around the world. In the face of apparent social, political and moral deterioration, he persisted. And then the Lord of the universe stepped in and took over. On Christmas day 1781, at St. Just Church in Cornwall, at 3.00 am, intercessors met to sing and pray. The heavens opened at last and they knew it. They prayed through until 9.00 am and regathered on Christmas evening. Throughout January and February, the movement continued. By March 1782 they were praying until midnight. No significant preachers were involved just people praying and the Holy Spirit responding.

Two years later in 1784, when 83year old John Wesley visited that area, he wrote, 'This country is all on fire and the flame is spreading from village to village.' And spread it did. The chapel which George Whitefield had built decades previously in Tottenham Court Road had to be enlarged to seat 5,000 people the largest in the world at that time. Baptist churches in North Hampton, Leicester, and the Midlands, set aside regular nights devoted to the drumbeat of prayer for revival. Methodists and Anglicans joined in.

Matthew Henry wrote, 'When God intends great mercy for His people, He first sets them praying.' Across the country prayer meetings were networking for revival. A passion for evangelism arose. Converts were being won not through the regular services of the churches, but at the prayer meetings! Some were held at 5.00 am, some at midnight. Some preChristians were drawn by dreams and visions. Some came to scoff but were thrown to the ground under the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes there was noise and confusion; sometimes stillness and solemnity. But always there was that ceaseless outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Whole denominations doubled, tripled and quadrupled in the next few years. It swept out from England to Wales, Scotland, United States, Canada and to some Third World countries.

Social Impact

The social impact of reformed lives was incredible. William Wilberforce, William Pitt, Edmund Bourke, and Charles Fox, all touched by this movement, worked ceaselessly for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. William Buxton worked on for the emancipation of all slaves in the British Empire and saw it happen in 1834. John Howard and Elizabeth Fry gave their lives to radically reform the prison system. Florence Nightingale founded modern nursing. Ashley Cooper, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, came to the rescue of the working poor to end their sixteenhour, seven-day-a-week work grind. He worked to stop exploitation of women and children in coal mines, the suffocation of boys as sweeps in chimneys. He established public parks and gymnasia, gardens, public libraries, night schools and choral societies.

The Christian Socialist Movement, which became the British Trade Union movement, was birthed. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was formed to protect animals. There was amazing growth in churches, and an astounding change in society came about because for forty years a man prayed and worked, seeing the establishment of thousands of similar prayer meetings, all united in calling on God for revival. Missionary societies were established.

William Carey was one who got swept up in that movement. We speak of him as the 'father of modern missions'. The environment of his situation was that he was a member of a ministers' revival prayer group which had been meeting for two years in Northampton in 1784-86. It was in 1786 he shared his vision of God's desire to see the heathen won for the Lord. He went on to establish what later became known as the Baptist Missionary Society. In 1795 the London Missionary Society was formed. In 1796 the Scottish Missionary Society was established, and later still the Church Missionary Society of the Anglicans was commenced.

Nineteenth Century

The prayer movement had a tremendous impact, but waned until the middle of the 19th century. Then God started something up in Canada, and the necessity to pray was picked up in New York. A quiet man called Jeremiah Lanphier had been appointed by the Dutch Reformed Church as a missionary to the central business district. Because the church was in decline and the life of the city was somewhat similar, he didn't know what to do. He was a layman. He called a prayer meeting in the city to be held at noon each Wednesday. Its first meeting was on the 23rd September 1857.

Eventually, five other men turned up. Two weeks later, they decided to move to a daily schedule of prayer. Within six months, 10,000 men were gathering to pray and that movement spread across America. Surprise, surprise! Within two years there were one million new believers added to the church. The movement swept out to touch England, Scotland, Wales and Ulster. Ireland was as tough a nut to crack as any. But when news reached Ireland of what was happening in America, James McQuilkan gathered three young men to meet for prayer in the Kells schoolhouse on March 14, 1859. They prayed and prayed for revival. Within a couple of months a similar prayer meeting was launched in Belfast. By September 21, 20,000 people assembled to pray for the whole of Ireland. It was later estimated that 100,000 converts resulted directly from these prayer movements in Ireland. It has also been estimated that in the years 1859-60, some 1,150,000 people were added to the church, wherever concerts of prayer were in operation.

Twentieth Century

Many would be aware of the Welsh Revival this century. It commenced in October 1904. It was spontaneous and was characterised by simultaneous, lengthy prayer meetings. In the first two months, 70,000 people came to the Lord. In 1905 in London alone, the Wesleyan Methodists increased from their base membership of 54,785 by an additional 50,021 people. Coming closer in time and nearer to Australia, in the Enga churches in Papua New Guinea there was a desperate spiritual state 20 years ago. To redress the situation, people there committed themselves to pray.

Prayer meetings began amongst pastors, missionaries and Bible College students. It spread out to the villages. In some villages, groups of people agreed to pray together every day until God sent new life to the church. On 15 September 1973, without any prior indication, simultaneously,

spontaneously, in village after village as pastors stood to deliver their normal Sunday morning messages, the Holy Spirit descended bringing conviction, confession, repentance and revival.

Normal work stopped as people in their thousands hurried to special meetings. Prayer groups met daily, morning and evening. Thousands of Christians were restored and thousands of pagans were converted. Whole villages became Christian, and the church grew not only in size but in maturity. In the Philippines in the 1980s, as a result of some people attending an international prayer conference in Korea, 200 missionaries of the Philippine Missionary Fellowship each organised prayer group meetings daily at 7.00 pm to pray for the growth of the church. They report that within a couple of years this directly resulted in the formation of 310 new churches.

Spectacular growth is occurring in Argentina. Jose Luis Vasquez saw his church explode from 600 to 4,500 with a constituency of 10,000 members in five years following a visit from Carlos Annacondia. Hector Gimenez started his church from zero in 1983. His congregation now numbers 70,000. Omar Cabrera started his church in 1972 with 15 members. There is now a combined membership of 90,000 members.

Peter Wagner, who is intensely investigating what lies behind such effective ministry, has arrived at the conclusion that powerful intercessory prayer is the chief weapon. Much of it is happening in a Pentecostal, charismatic environment. But the structure or doctrine is not the essential thing. Walter Hollenweger, a prolific researcher into Pentecostalism said that for them, from the earliest Pentecostals onwards, it was more important to pray than to organise (1972:29). Wherever that principle is invoked, amazing things happen.

In 1982 Christians in East Germany started to form small groups of ten to twelve persons, committed to meet to pray for peace. By October 1989, 50,000 people were involved in Monday night prayer meetings. In 1990, when those praying people moved quietly into the streets, their numbers quickly swelled to 300,000 and 'the wall came tumbling down.' In Cuba in 1990, an Assemblies of God pastor whose congregation never exceeded 100 people meeting once a week suddenly found himself conducting 12 services per day for 7,000 people. They started queuing at 2.00 am and even broke down the doors just to get into the prayer meetings.

Will we “pray the pray”?

Today there is great pressure from many directions in our society to work harder, to become smarter, to produce results, or to be moved aside. The church in many western countries is in danger of absorbing this mentality into its own attitudes and practices, forgetting that in the divine human endeavour, success comes not by might nor by power but by a gracious release of God's Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4:6).

Years ago, R. A. Torrey (1974:190) said, 'We live in a day characterised by the multiplication of man's machinery and the diminution of God's power. The great cry of our day is work, work, work! Organise, organise, organise! Give us some new society! Tell us some new methods! Devise some new machinery! But the great need of our day is prayer, more prayer and better prayer.' Friends, in the church in the west we now have the most up to date, state of the art technology available to communicate the Gospel. Yet comparatively little seems to be happening in so many countries.

In terms of the growth and mission of our churches, could it be that whilst the world has learned to communicate with robots on Mars, in sections of the church we have forgotten to communicate with the Lord of the earth? If that is so, then our best course of action is to stand again with the company of the first disciples and, like them, return to the Head of the church Jesus Christ and say 'Lord, teach us to pray' (Luke 11:1).

References:

David Bryant (1984) *Concerts of Prayer*. Ventura, California: Ventura.

Paul Y Cho (1984) *Prayer. Key to Revival*. Waco, Texas: Word.

S D Gordon (1983) 'Prayer, the greatest thing,' *Australia's New Day*, April 40.

Walter J Hollenwager (1972) The Pentecostals. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg.
Greg O'Connor (1990) 'Miracles in Cuba,' New Day, May.
David Shibley (1985) Let's Pray in the Harvest. Rockwall, Texas: Church on the Rock.
R A Torrey (1974) The Power of Prayer. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
Bob J Whillhite (1988) Why Pray? Altamonte Springs, Florida: Creation House.
(c) Stuart Robinson. First published by the Australian Baptist Missionary Society, 1992.
Used by permission/
Reproduction is allowed as long as the copyright remains intact with the text.

Source: Rev Dr Stuart Robinson