

PRAYER AND THE CHURCH

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Thirty years ago, Francis Schaeffer claimed that if the Holy Spirit and prayer were taken from the church in North America it could be some time before they were missed.

In the pragmatic evangelical world, where we are busy organizing, serving, and reaching out, our dependence on God can become very occasional. And in subtle ways we begin to act as though He needs us more than we need Him. Often, the trends in leadership are away from spirituality and toward superficiality.

The gathering of God's people was characterized by Jesus as "a house of prayer" not "a house of preaching" or "a house of music". Historically, prayer has always been foundational.

In an age of professionalism, perhaps we have separated our leadership skills from our spirituality. Indeed, some of us have tried to create an abundance of the former (skills) to mask our poverty in the latter (prayer).

We study how to organize, manage, recruit, and administer. We learn the arts of communication and pastoral calling. In short, we build strong public images. We can even preach and teach the Bible with sole reliance on commentators, tapes, web-sites, and printed curriculum.

But this is not necessarily the stuff of Holy Spirit and prayer.

Christian leaders don't need to pray more. We might consider, instead, our call to be people of prayer.

Henri Nouwen understood the difference. He wrote: "Prayer is not a preparation for work or an indispensable condition for effective ministry. Prayer is life; prayer and ministry are the same and can never be divorced."

Harvest Evangelism, under the leadership of Ed Siloso, has been saying this for years. Prayer is not "pre-evangelism" but evangelism itself. And springing from this life of prayer is a spiritual sensitivity and awareness through which the Holy Spirit works.

There is a qualitative difference between a person who prays and a prayerful person. A prayerful person will always pray but a person who prays is not necessarily prayerful.

The cultural infatuation with entrepreneurial leadership has frequently distracted us from the biblical call to prayerful leadership.

The starting point for some of us might be deep contrition and repentance. We have prostituted the call of God and sold out to the sirens of secularism. Desperate to be significant, we have built with wood and hay and stubble to meet the success criteria of our culture. Instead, Christ beckons us to surrender. And therein lies the cost of the prayerful life. Inevitably it crucifies our independence, our self-sufficiency, our pride, and our personal ambition.

The world doesn't need an ambition of a new kind. It starves for authentic men and women of God, yielded to Christ, sensitive to the Holy Spirit, committed to obedience and devoted to prayer ... not slabs of prayer, but lives of prayer.