



THE PRAYER CLOSET

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Praying For The Growth of The Church

God has given the church the task of proclaiming the Word of God to the lost. It is the responsibility of believers to declare that Christ has died, been raised from the dead according to the Scriptures and that as the reigning Lord he now grants the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Holy Spirit to those who will surrender to Him. In issuing the gospel invitation, we are not free to conceal the cost of discipleship. **Jesus still calls all who would follow Him to deny himself and to live a transformed life.**

The church is to grow by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost. There are other kinds of growth. One type of growth is "biological" growth. Biological growth results when church members have children and these grow up and are saved and join the church. This is the purpose and goal of Christian families. This is a wonderful testimony to the power of godly Christian homes.

Another type of growth is transfer growth. This type of growth occurs when a person or family moves from one church to another. This usually takes place when a person or family has to move and relocate into another area. That person or family then seeks to find a new church home.

These types of growth are a blessing and should be an avenue of growth for every church. Yet, there is another type of growth. And, this should be the primary way that the church grows. This type is what I term "conversion growth." It is when a person who is lost hears the gospel and is converted. This lost person turns away from his or her sin and surrenders to Jesus Christ in true faith. Then, he or she becomes an active and responsible member of Christ's church (**Acts 2:47**).

The tragedy of our day is that most churches have become comfortable with the first two types of growth. The only conversions that many churches see are those of the children of church members. If it were not for these, these churches would never see anyone saved. Other churches grow by disgruntled people who leave their church in search of a "better" church. Vance Havner referred to this kind of situation as "swapping seats on the deck of the Titanic."

Yet, it is time that we come to understand that our purpose is to share the gospel and make disciples (**Matthew 28:19-20**). This is the church's great task. We can settle for nothing less than this. To settle for anything less than this is to be disobedient to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is important to notice that Jesus Christ has called His church to "make disciples." For too long, the church has focused on getting "decisions." Pastors often ask one another how many "decisions" they had in a revival. Church members judge pastors and evangelists on how many "decision" they get. Success is achieved when the person makes a verbal commitment or "decision."

Yet, this is not what Jesus Christ is calling His church to do. It is true that we are to call on sinners to immediately repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Yet, this is not the end. A "decision" centers around a point in time. A "disciple" centers around an on-going lifestyle. It is the responsibility of the church to lead people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and teach them how to live for Jesus Christ. It is not the end when a person turns from his or her sin to Jesus Christ; this is only the

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beginning. **The gospel that calls on people to surrender to Jesus Christ also calls on them to follow Him in the personal lives.**

The church is to grow in this way. This is God's purpose for the church and He will provide the power for this. Yet, how does a church receive the power for this? This power is released in the church by prayer. Prayer is the foundational principle of leading sinners to Jesus Christ and then discipling them. God will bless and honor the body of believers that will seek Him for the conversion of sinners and the leading of these people into discipleship. **God will add to the church which has a broken heart and a bent knee in behalf of those who are lost.**

For years, I have wanted to write a book entitled, "Whatever Happened To Prayer?" It amazes me what churches will do to get the attention of the lost world. There is no end to the number of gimmicks, plans, and programs that have been devised to bring sinners to Christ and enable the church to grow. Do not misunderstand the previous statement. There is nothing wrong with programs that attempt to reach sinners with the gospel and to lead them to discipleship. **The problem is when plans and programs become a substitute for prayer.** Whatever happened to believers meeting in an altar and pleading with God to save sinners and grow the church? Whatever happened to believers fasting and pouring out their hearts to God for those who do not know Jesus Christ? Whatever happened to weeping and intercession for sinners?

It is time that the church return to the power of humble pleading for the salvation of sinners and the growth of the church. God and God alone can and does save sinners. However, it is our responsibility to plead with God for their salvation and the growth of Christ's church in making disciples (**Romans 10:1-3**).

The following list is a series of prayer requests that you can pray in order to see your church experience true growth. These prayer requests focusing on seeing God work in and through your church in this matter. These prayer requests are offered as a guide to help you in praying for the growth of the church:

(1) **Plead that God would give the believers of your church a broken and burdened heart for the lost (Isaiah 57:15; Romans 9:1-3).** If the church is going to reach lost people and disciple them, the believers must have broken, burdened hearts for them. Too many believers lack this burden for those who are lost. You may have to start with yourself. As you have been reading this, you may not have been interested in this article. The salvation of sinners and growth of the church may not mean anything to you. Yet, you are the one who needs the broken, burdened heart. You need to plead that God will break you and burden you for these issues. Then, you need to plead that other believers will have the same broken and burdened heart as you;

(2) **Ask God to convince the believers of your church that Jesus Christ is the only hope for any sinner (Acts 4:12; John 14:6).** This is something that every believer will admit is true. Yet, we need this burned on our consciences. It must be the abiding conviction and absolute certainty of our hearts that Jesus Christ is the only hope for any sinner. You must know fully that there is no hope for anyone outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. This will lay the foundation for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. If you are certain and convinced that Jesus Christ is the only hope of sinners, it will be a motivation to reach out to others with the gospel;

(3) **Call on God to give the believers of your church certainty and conviction of the doctrine of hell (Matthew 10:28; Hebrews 10:31).** Again, this is something that believers need certainty and

conviction about in their minds. It needs to be burned into our hearts and consciences that those who do not have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ are lost and will spend an eternity in hell unless they turn to Christ in faith and repentance. If you are certain and convinced of this truth, it will be a motivation to share the gospel with those who are lost. Hell is a reality and will be the eternal of those who have not turned to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and repentance. Believers need the Spirit of God to make this truth living reality in their hearts;

(4) Plead with God that He will burden and motivate the believers of your church to be personal witnesses to Jesus Christ (Matthew 9:37-38; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). God works through the witnessing and preaching of believers to transform their lives. People must hear the Word of God if their lives are going to be transformed (**Romans 10:12-14**). This means that believers must be diligent to share the Word of God with others;

(5) Plead that God would convince the believers of your church that they are responsible to God for their witness to unbelievers (Ezekiel 3:17-20). We must come to understand that we are responsible before God in the matter of sharing the Word of God with unbelievers. If we warn them and exhort them to come to Christ and they do not, we are cleared of our responsibility. We can save no one; we are not responsible for their reaction. However, we are responsible for our witness of lack of witness to them. If we do not warn and share the gospel with unbelievers, their blood is upon our hands. We need this burned upon our hearts and consciences. Ask the Holy Spirit to do this in your life and the believers who make up the church that you are a member of;

(6) Ask God to give the believers of your church a burden to pray for the lost (Romans 10:1). Too many times our prayer times in churches are nothing more than "organ" recitals. We spend all our time praying for "organs": someone's heart, lung, or liver. I believe in praying for healing; I believe in praying for the sick. However, I also believe that we must pray for those who are lost. We need a spirit of prayer for those who are outside of Jesus Christ. Plead that God would make Paul's cry in Romans 10:1 yours and also the cry of the believers in your church. Ask the Holy Spirit to create a longing to pray for the lost in your community or city;

(7) Call on God to create an atmosphere in your church so that it will be a place where people are saved and discipled (Acts 2:42-47). By this, I mean that you need to pray that your church will have the spiritual qualities that are modeled in the church of the Acts. These qualities provide an atmosphere in which people are saved and are discipled in the truth. These qualities are:

- A deep commitment to and the diligent study of God's Word (**Acts 2:42**);
- Genuine and mutual love for one another (**Acts 2:42**);
- True fellowship and unity (**Acts 2:42**);
- A deep commitment to and diligent practice of prayer (**Acts 2:42**);
- The manifest presence and power of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:43**);
- Mutual sharing and ministry among believers (**Acts 2:44-45**);
- Sincerity and openness among believers (**Acts 2:46**);
- Genuine praise to God (**Acts 2:47**)

Plead that God would create this kind of atmosphere among the believers who make up the church.

(8) Pray that God would remove anything that would hinder the outreach and growth of the church (Acts 5; Romans 16:17-18; Psalm 83). There are various factors that hinder the outreach and growth of the church. These factors are numerous and varied. Some of these are attitudes, traditions, apathy, and past sins that have never been dealt with by the membership. Unfortunately, it can sometimes be a person or persons. You need to pray that God would remove what is hindering. If it is a person, you need to plead that God would deal with this person. Plead for the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. Ask that grace and mercy would be shown to this person. Call on God to do whatever it takes to deal with this person;

(9) Plead with God that He would open doors for the Word of God in your community or city (2 Thessalonians 3:1; Colossians 4:3). The apostle Paul pleads with these believers to pray for an open door for the gospel. You need to pray in the same way. You need to ask God to open doors in your city or community. Plead with God for opportunities to share the gospel with those around you. Ask God to break through the hardness of heart and indifference in your area to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Call on God make people receptive to the gospel. Plead with God with all your might for this;

(10) Plead with God that His power would be exhibited in your outreach and discipling (2 Thessalonians 3:1). In this verse, the apostle asks these believers to pray for the word to run or spread rapidly. Paul must have been a sports fan because many of his illustrations of the truth came from athletics. The picture that he uses here comes from the races at the Olympic games. Paul wanted the Word of God to run or to move powerfully among the Corinthians. Paul desired that the Word of God would powerfully work and change the lives of the Corinthians. This prayer was powerfully answered (**1 Corinthians 6:9-11**). The power of God was exhibited in Paul's preaching and ministry because these people turned from their sin to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. You need to plead that the power of God would be exhibited through the preaching and ministry of your church. It is the power of God and the Word of God that is going to transform the lives of people. Call on God to reveal His power through the preaching, witnessing, and ministering of your church;

(11) Plead that God's protection would be experienced by the believers of your church (2 Thessalonians 3:2). In this verse, the apostle Paul asks the people to pray for God's protection on him as he preached the gospel in Corinth. He understood that there were many dangers involved in sharing the gospel with a lost world. He needed God's protection in his attempt to spread the gospel. The same is still true today. Believers need to experience God's protection in spreading the gospel and discipling people. Sometimes believers will need physical protection. Sometimes believers will need emotional protection. The task that God has given to the church is difficult and can be frustrating. Believers need God to protect them from discouragement and frustration in this matter. Believers will always need protection from Satan's snares and attacks. Satan will attack and seek to destroy any believers who struggle to share the gospel and make disciples of their city or community.

Developing A Praying Church

The great need of this day in which we live is a praying church. God grants power and blessing to the church that humbles itself before Him and pours its heart out to Him. Yet, how can you develop a praying church? No matter where a church is in its "prayer maturity," there is always room for growth.

There are some basic keys to developing a praying church. These keys are needed if you would develop a church that can seek God and see answers to prayer.

The first key to developing a praying church is a praying leadership. Praying leaders are essential in developing a praying church. Recent surveys have revealed some staggering facts. At a recent pastors' conference in Texas, pastors were surveyed concerning their prayer lives. 95% admitted that they prayed five minutes or less a day. A professor did a survey of 572 pastors and found that these pastors spent an average of eighteen minutes a day in prayer. Another poll revealed that the average Christian spends three to five minutes a day in intentional prayer. This same survey revealed no noticeable difference between leaders' and church members' prayer habits.

We need to understand that it takes praying leaders to make a praying church. A stream will not rise higher than its source. The only leader who can expect his people to be strong in prayer is the one who sets the example in prayer. Being a praying leader does not mean that you talk much about prayer or that you preach numerous sermons on prayer. Promoting and teaching about prayer is no substitute for praying. The leaders must be absolutely committed to prayer.

The Bible reveals that leaders must be men and women of prayer. The Lord Jesus Christ, the leader of leaders, gave a high priority to prayer. And He expects His followers to do the same. He teaches His people that they should always pray and not give up (**Luke 18:1**). He teaches His people to watch and pray and not to fall into temptation (**Matthew 26:41**). The apostles appointed deacons so that they could devote themselves to the Word of God and prayer. Paul bathed his life and ministry in prayer. He proved for all time that powerful ministry flows out of powerful and effective praying.

If you are a leader, you must cultivate your own prayer life. You must be a man or woman who is fully committed to praying. If you are not a leader, then you need to pray for the leaders. Ask God to make them men or women of prayer. Call on God to give them a spirit of prayer.

The second key to developing a praying church is that prayer must be given a high priority in the life and ministry of the church. It is clear from the gospels that Jesus Christ made prayer a priority in his ministry (**Luke 5:16; Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12**). The church in the book of Acts gave prayer that same high priority. When their leaders were threatened by the Sanhedrin, they cried out to God in prayer (**Acts 4:24, 31**). When Peter was scheduled to die, the church earnestly prayed through the night to God for him (**Acts 12:5**). The power and the effectiveness of the early church cannot be understood or explained without prayer.

In his book *Prayer*, Oren Hallesby contends that "prayer is the most important work in the kingdom of God. It is a labor for which there is no substitute in the kingdom of God." The church is powerless and ineffective without prayer. As A.J. Gordon said, "**We can do more than pray after we have prayed, but we cannot do more than pray until we have prayed.**"

Prayer will be a part of every Christian's and every church's life. It is not a question of the place of prayer in the life of a Christian or church. Yet, the question is how important a place prayer has in the life of the Christian and the church. It is time that churches honestly look at how important a place prayer has in the church. Is prayer a priority in the congregation? Is prayer the first step or the last resort when it comes to church decisions and problems? Is prayer the first step in reaching the community? Is the church struggling to grow in prayer or is it content to use the same old trite sayings and clichés and call this prayer? In order to develop a praying church, prayer has to have a high priority.