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PRAYER IN THE CORPORATE WORSHIP SERVICE

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The early Church in Acts did four things when it gathered together. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). I don’t think that means 25 percent of the time was given to each, but it clearly shows a significant importance was put on each element. If our church gatherings were measured against those four things, where would we stand?

Clearly corporate prayer was given a significant place in early Church meetings. In our day, most churches relegate prayer to a pastor or leader praying once or twice in a service, maybe a worship leader offering a simple prayer amid a song set, perhaps there is a time for people to come forward and be prayed for. While these are important expressions of prayer, they

do not usually constitute powerful, corporate prayer.

Instead, corporate prayer has been relegated to the weekly prayer meeting, certainly an important service and event for a church. Unfortunately many churches have disbanded these due to lack of interest or sheer boredom. Most prayer meetings have become a few sitting around in a circle, taking requests about all the physical and personal needs of the church's members, then praying until each one has been mentioned. It is hardly a dynamic time of powerful corporate prayer.

Congregations need to experience powerful, dynamic, earth-changing corporate prayer. And the best place to experience it is in the Sunday morning worship service. Why? Three reasons:

1. Because prayer is not truly corporate unless it is done with all your people. The morning worship is the only place where you have most of your people each week. Acts 12:5 tells us that "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by *the church*." We can have good times of people praying together at other moments, but the value of an entire congregation calling out to God in agreement is extremely powerful. When a congregation agrees on something and prays, it is effective!
2. It teaches your people how to pray. These days, most believers never participate in times of praying with others. They may observe prayer a few times in a worship service, but they are never required to try it. As a result, most believers do not have any confidence to pray. When they can see and hear others pray, that can grow their own prayer lives as well.
3. It is easier to have a leader-led prayer time in the morning worship service than at a less formal weeknight meeting. This is important for prayer to be truly effective. In the midweek service, often times well-meaning pray-ers will take the prayer meeting away from a leader to pray about their own agendas. This will not happen in a worship service. As a result you can better "manipulate" prayer to operate with the biblical principles of corporate prayer.

Biblical Principles of Corporate Prayer

There are five biblical principles of powerful corporate prayer. The more

of these elements are present in our prayer times (during worship or other times), the more powerful the prayer.

Desperation. Ezra 8:22-23 records a time of corporate prayer surrounding a three-day fast. The priest Ezra was taking a group of Jews back to repopulate Israel. They were going to cross dangerous terrain and needed protection. The interesting thing here, however, is that Ezra had a solution—the king would have likely given them soldiers to go along—but he refused to take it. He refused to do the obvious thing in favor of relying on God.

We need to learn from that. The more desperate we are about something, the more vibrant our prayers. When going to prayer corporately, look for ways to impress a sense of desperation in your people. Remember what happened in churches following 9/11? Prayer meetings were full for several weeks. Why? Desperation. As you pick the focus about which to pray, figure out a way to build in desperation. We can't solve this, God. We need You.

One Focus. Powerful prayer is focused prayer. It is not a shotgun approach—giving prayer requests and praying for ten different things. Effective corporate prayer is topical. The leader explains, “now we are going to pray for . . .” We see this played out in the story of Peter's imprisonment (Acts 12). Verse 5 tells us of a prayer meeting for Peter. Not everything under the sun, and “oh yeah, don't forget Peter.” In the morning worship service, picking one subject for which to pray is all you need to do—and it is powerful.

One Voice. One voice is a numerical principle. As was mentioned above, the same chapter in Acts tells us that *the church* was earnestly and constantly praying to God. *Everyone*. Not five people in a little room on Wednesday night. A powerful dynamic occurs when an entire congregation prays on the same theme. Again, the only place you will have the entire congregation together is Sunday morning worship.

Invoking the Presence. In 2 Chronicles 6-7 at the dedication of Solomon's Temple, we see God's glory indwelling His temple so much that everyone fell with their faces to the ground. No one went inside. In Solomon's dedication prayer, he invited God to come and dwell. “Now therefore, arise, O LORD God, to your resting place . . .” (2 Chron. 6:41).

We often just take comfort in the presence spoken of in Matthew 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” But there is another presence of God—His manifest pres-

ence. It is a presence you can literally sense. It is a transforming presence. We need to look for ways to encourage that presence of God into our midst. He comes by invitation and He comes through praise. Psalm 22:3 tells us that God inhabits the praises of His people. There is no better place to regularly experience the manifest presence of God than the worship service. When we pray in the middle of, or following a time of intense worship—worship that is entirely focused upward, on Jesus Christ rather than on us—we more readily sense His presence and our prayers become more kingdom focused.

Agreement. The last element of powerful corporate prayer is praying in agreement. This is different than focus. It is where everyone knows and agrees with what they are asking God. Often when a congregation prays about an issue in a church there is not agreement. We all have a different idea of what should be done. So when we pray, we often just pray our own agendas. (Just as an aside—agreement will come in any issue if people pray together. As we pray with others, we become more open to God’s agenda and we let go of our own.)

In a leader-directed prayer time during a morning worship service it is easier to be in agreement. The leader simply gives direction as to what they will ask God to do. He might say something like this, “After seeking God, the leaders of our church feel that God is moving us to look for a piece of property on which to build. Let’s ask God to reveal that piece of land to us.”

Ways to Incorporate Prayer in the Service

When incorporating group prayer into the morning worship service several principles are important. First until your people are used to it, keep it fairly short. Never let them go more than five minutes in a prayer group on one topic. Two to three minutes is plenty. Second, put prayer points and even a simple prayer on power point or in the bulletin. Instruct those who are nervous about joining in that they are not being forced to pray, but if they would like to, here is a prayer or some thoughts to use when they pray. Third, when you start doing this, and perhaps a few times afterward, give them some prayer protocol instructions. Remind them that they should not pray like they do when they are by themselves. All prayers should be short, 30-45 second maximum, to give everyone a chance to participate and so no one is intimidated. People can pray multiple times in a group.

Pray the thoughts of a song. Many songs—especially contemporary ones—are prayers themselves, focused on Christ. If we mean what we are singing, then we are praying when we sing. But, another benefit is that songs can be catalysts to dynamic prayer.

For example, a song like “Touching Heaven, Changing Earth” can foster in a time of prayer for revival. A song like “Breathe” can generate prayer for spiritual hunger in each other. A song like “Crown Him with Many Crowns” or “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” can move into times of corporate praise where we spontaneously shout out praises to God.

To do it, a worship leader simply guides the people into groups of three to six and instructs them on what to pray. The musicians keep playing to provide some background music. After two to three minutes end the time by moving into the next song.

Set aside a 7 to 10 minute prayer time. Pick a topic of importance to your church or leaders. An upcoming outreach event, a special program, a deep need in the church, the nation, etc. The more the topic relates to the people, the more dynamic the time will be. Have people pray in groups over this topic. But again, offer clear direction and ideas of things to pray.

Pray the Sermon Application. A pastor often has something in the sermon that needs to get across to the people. Why not have a time (two to three minutes) where people get into groups of three or four and pray that application into each other. The pastor needs to give specific instructions so they understand what they are to pray. A bulletin insert or power point slide with the important points are all that is needed.

Pastor Guided Prayer. Another excellent way to incorporate prayer is to have the people pray a prayer in unison at the end of the message. The pastor can put a prayer together that reflects exactly the truths and applications with which the people are to walk away. Instruct them to pray out loud after you. You say a phrase and give them time to repeat it. Not only will this do something powerful by praying the application into them, but people learn to pray. They hear their pastor pray and they begin to understand the kinds of spiritual things they can ask God for in prayer.

A Time to Pray for Needs. While this is not corporate prayer in the truest sense, it can be a wonderful time of blessing for your people. Simply put, you set aside time in the service where people can pray for others. It

can be done a number of ways.

During worship or at the end of a service have prayer teams (teams of two people—a husband/wife team or two males, two females) come forward or line up around the church. As you sing, people can come forward, walk up to a team and be prayed for. The book *Praying Grace* (PrayerPoint Press) by Terry Teykl and the DVD set *Upfront* (PrayerShop Publishing) are excellent training resources on this subject.

In a smaller congregation it can be meaningful to have people with a need stand where they are. Then have groups gather around them to pray for their need. The congregation keeps worshipping while this is going on.

Conclusion

If your people won't come to prayer meeting, take prayer meeting to the people. Having times of corporate prayer in the morning worship service can have a profound affect on your people and church. People learn to pray and develop a heart to pray what is on God's heart.

Questions for Further Thought or Discussion

1. What are three or four hindrances that keep prayer minimized in corporate worship? Provide a biblical example or teaching that confronts each barrier.
2. Identify and explain five or six different methods of turning an audience into participants.
3. Design a corporate worship experience that incorporates several diverse prayer opportunities

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

Franklin, John. *And the Place Was Shaken*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005.

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- Teykl, Terry. *Praying Grace: Training for Personal Ministry*. Muncie, IN: PrayerPoint Press, 2002.
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