

Building Praying Leaders

By Dave Butts

Jonathan Graf, editor of Prayer Connect magazine, stated: “Not long ago, I was in a church that clearly “gets it” where prayer is concerned. Mountain View Community Church in Fresno, CA, hosted our “Can Prayer Save America?” event this past February. From the time the conference opened, it was evident that prayer is simply a part of this church’s DNA.

“When we lead such a conference, we ask that the host church provide worship. We did not coach the worship team at Mountain View to lead in a certain way, yet the worship experience was loaded with prayer. Multiple times the worship leader prayed in between songs. His song selections were clearly related to the theme—crying out for God to send revival and spiritual awakening.

“Several times during a worship song, Mountain View people approached a microphone and prayed, reflecting the song’s content. At one point during a particular song, the main prayer leader asked people from the audience to pray bold, transforming truths related to revival and awakening. It was a powerful moment.

“But this church wasn’t just putting prayer front and center because it was a prayer conference. Prayer permeates its ministry each Sunday and throughout the week. Pastor Fred Leonard models prayer and disciplines his staff to engage in prayer. They all keep prayer/spiritual growth journals—and for accountability, they must regularly share from their journals during staff meetings. Their weekly two-to three-hour staff meetings are characterized by an hour to even half of their meeting time, given to praying together.

“In Sunday school and small groups church leaders provide regular training regarding prayer. Every year they schedule at least two prayer initiatives—from a week to 40 days—during which the entire congregation is praying on the same theme. Mountain View wants every congregant to be disciplined in prayer so that he or she knows how to pray with confidence. The leadership does not leave it to chance!

“The most intriguing thing that sets them apart from every other church I know: Anyone who steps into leadership (such as elders, small group leaders, and those in teaching roles) must take a 12-week “prayer usher” class before they are qualified—and then they must receive ongoing prayer training.

“A prayer usher (a term coined by Dr. Terry Teykl) is trained in taking individuals and their issues before God’s throne of grace. They usher people—through praying for and with them—into God’s presence. These trained ushers are the ones who pray with people at the altar, visit the sick, or encourage those in need of ministry support. The church also trains prayer ushers who are not directly involved in other leadership.

“Finally, Mountain View demonstrates a regional prayer influence by encouraging Fresno churches to pray together. Now a significant number of churches participate in a yearly prayer calendar that includes ten joint prayer events. Pastors pray together, within geographic clusters, weekly or monthly around the city.”

(“As Natural as Breathing,” by Jonathan Graf, [Prayer Connect](#), Issue 4)

If you’ve served any length of time in any Christian congregation, you know what it is to deal with complaining saints. It’s one of the sad realities of church life. Lest we think its a modern phenomenon, just look at Acts 6: 1 “...the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic

Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.” Complaining Christians have a long lineage!

It’s fascinating to see how the leaders of the church in Jerusalem dealt with the situation that created complaining. It certainly would have been easy for them to step up and handle the unequal distribution of food to widows themselves. But they didn’t. They asked the church to choose other qualified leaders to handle this situation. Why didn’t they do it themselves? Because they had a prior commitment. “We will . . . give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

One of the key marks of spiritual leadership is knowing your calling and priorities. The apostles had those marks. They knew that heaven’s calling to them was for prayer and the ministry of the Word. It wasn’t that other things were not important or necessary. It’s just that they needed to make sure that prayer and the ministry of the Word was given the priority.

My friend, Daniel Henderson, often says that when he graduated from seminary, he came out with his sword sharpened on only one side. We often train our leaders in the ministry of the Word, but neglect the ministry of prayer. A sword sharpened on just one side is not as sharp or effective as one sharpened on both sides. I believe that is a good description of much of leadership ministry today.

It’s not that Christian leaders today are against prayer. That’s just not so. But prayer is not necessarily high on their priority list, especially when you gauge it against the other things that compete for their time. At least part of the reason for this is they have not been trained in prayer for their personal life nor in leading a church to become a praying church. How did it come about that so few pastors feel equipped in leading in prayer?

In the next chapter, we'll discuss in greater depth the role of spiritual warfare in our prayerlessness, but I'd like to address one specific issue relating to that here. Most of what we deal with in spiritual warfare is what I call micro level. That's personal temptations and issues we face regularly. But there is also macro level warfare that moves to a higher level. It is on that macro level that I believe Satan won a great victory many centuries ago.

Satan's Victory

Somewhere along the line, hundreds of years ago, Satan convinced good, godly scholars that prayer was not a topic worthy of academic study. I can almost hear the thoughts diabolically placed in their minds: "Of course prayer is important, but we can't take up classroom time to teach it. Our students should just pray." It sounds true doesn't it? There's just enough truth to be deadly.

Through the years, prayer has become completely experiential, with little to no serious theological thought given to it. Look at the books that seminarians have studied called "systematic theologies." You will find the study of salvation (soteriology), the church (ecclesiology), second coming (eschatology) and many other "ologies." But you won't find prayer. Here's the problem with that. A theology of a topic requires that you think deeply about the area. It will push a student to delve into it and examine it from every angle. Because we have not done that with prayer, we have the common situation where pastors believe that prayer is important, but they aren't sure why. If an area of the Christian life has not been studied in the academic setting, it will often take a backseat when it comes to actual practice.

Of course, there is always the danger of making prayer merely an academic topic for study instead of a dynamic encounter with Jesus Christ. But we have clearly allowed the pendulum to swing the other way and have ignored the opportunities to

train our pastors and church leaders in powerful personal prayer and what could happen when they lead their congregation to become a praying people.

Seminaries and Bible colleges must become laboratories for dynamic prayer ministry. A few years ago, America's National Prayer Committee looked at the current situation and moved to commission a textbook on prayer for use in our schools. [*Giving Ourselves to Prayer: An Acts 6:4 Primer for Ministry*](#) is increasingly being used as seminaries become aware of this deficiency in pastoral preparedness. More than a textbook is needed though. Some brave academicians will need to fight the curriculum wars to see that a serious study of prayer becomes required training for pastors.

It isn't only at the level of training that this battle must be fought. Christian leaders will need to educate the local church of the need for praying leaders. One of the saddest illustrations I know comes from a church in the Midwest that told their pastor, "Your work on our time. You pray on your own time." What grief that perspective must bring to the Lord! Contrast that to Andrew Murray's comment: "Time spent in prayer will yield more than that given to work. Prayer alone gives work its worth and its success. Prayer opens the way for God Himself to do His work in us and through us. Let our chief work as God's messengers be intercession; in it we secure the presence and power of God to go with us."

Countless generations have failed to see the spiritual work of prayer in the church. Prayer has been a tool to call meetings to order, and has been seen as the work of a few spiritual giants.

We don't necessarily expect or even want our pastors to be people of prayer. If you disagree, then look over the job descriptions of most congregations when looking for a pastor. Prayer is often completely missing! Rarely does a church say to a potential pastor: "Tell us about your prayer life."

It will not be easy to turn this ship around. It will take godly, visionary leaders at all levels to see this happen. From seminaries and Bible colleges to pastors and congregational leaders, all will need to stand together to say, "This must change! We must give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word!"

Many of the greatest leaders of the Church through the years have testified to the critical need of prayer for those in leadership. See if these words stir you as they have me:

"I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach."
—Charles H. Spurgeon

"Prayer is my chief work, and it is by means of it that I carry on the rest." —Thomas Hooker, Puritan

"[The] power of prayer can never be overrated. They who cannot serve God by preaching need not regret. If a man can but pray he can do anything. He who knows how to overcome with God in prayer has Heaven and earth at his disposal." —Charles H. Spurgeon

"What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer." —E.M. Bounds

"Ministers who do not spend two hours a day in prayer are not worth a dime a dozen—degrees or no degrees." —Leonard Ravenhill

"Out of a very intimate acquaintance with D. L. Moody, I wish to testify that he was a far greater prayer man than he was preacher. Time and time again, he was confronted by obstacles that seemed insurmountable, but he always knew the way to overcome all difficulties. He knew the way to bring to pass anything that needed to be brought to pass. He knew and believed in the deepest depths of his soul that nothing was

too hard for the Lord, and that prayer could do anything that God could do.” –R. A. Torrey

Points to Ponder

How committed to prayer are the leaders of your church?

Were you surprised to hear of the lack of training in prayer in Bible colleges and seminaries? Why or why not?

What do you believe can be done to restore a proper understanding of the role of prayer in spiritual leadership?

Are there steps your church can take to make prayer a prerequisite for leadership?

–Taken from [*Forgotten Power: A Simple Theology for a Praying Church*](#) by David Butts. (C) 2015.