

Learning to Pray Like the Early Christians

By David Butts

New Testament Christians were praying Christians. The church was born at a prayer meeting on the day of Pentecost, and the disciples continued to pray as they went on their way proclaiming the good news of Jesus around the world. That really shouldn't surprise us. The leaders of the church, the apostles, had gone to Jesus earlier and asked Him to teach them to pray. He did. Then He instructed them to teach others what He had taught them. From Jesus, to the apostles, to the first-century Christians, and down through the years to us, believers have taught and practiced prayer.

As we focus on prayer in the book of Acts, we find that it was a core value of the early church. I doubt they used the term "core value" as we often do today, but the Scriptures indicate that prayer had a place in the key priorities of the church. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). There we find the core values or priorities of the church:

- 1. Apostles' doctrine**
- 2. Fellowship**
- 3. Breaking of bread**
- 4. Prayer.**

Is prayer one of the core values of your church? Certainly we all give lip service to its value, but does prayer really find its way into the nuts and bolts of how you "do church"? In all

too many congregations, prayer has become only a way of opening and closing meetings and a means of expressing concern for the sick and hurting. In the book of Acts, believers didn't simply say that they were devoted to prayer; they demonstrated it by their actions.

Corporate prayer was a major emphasis in the early church. The disciples understood the importance and power of praying together. From the day of Pentecost on, they met regularly for the purpose of prayer:

Acts 1:14 – “They all joined together constantly in prayer.”

Acts 2:42 – “They devoted themselves...to prayer.”

Acts 3:1 – “...going up to the temple at the time of prayer...”

Acts 4:24 – “...they raised their voices together in prayer...”

Acts 12:12 – “...where many people had gathered and were praying.”

Acts 13:3 – “...after they had fasted and prayed...”

Acts 20:36 – “...he knelt down with all of them and prayed.”

If New Testament Christians saw the importance of praying together, shouldn't we do likewise? Most would agree that it's a good thing for Christians to pray together, but we must move beyond mere intellectual assent and take specific action steps. We must provide good teaching from our pulpits and classrooms concerning the importance and value of corporate prayer. A wide variety of prayer opportunities need to be offered for the church, focusing on many needs and topics. We need to be less anxious about the numbers who attend these prayer meetings. A small gathering of three or four people praying can make a real difference.

As we contrast New Testament praying with contemporary praying, it's clear that prayer in the book of Acts was not

for outward show. We don't see New Testament Christian leaders coming together to make decisions and opening their discussion with a "word of prayer." Instead, we see Christian leaders coming together who understood that their primary purpose in assembling was prayer. Sometimes out of that prayer time there emerged decisions that would refocus or otherwise impact the entire body of Christ. You see that clearly in the upper room as the disciples met to pray before Pentecost. Though their purpose was prayer, they stopped the prayer meeting long enough to select a replacement for Judas Iscariot. What a difference from many church "elections" today! Those early Christians would agree with Joy Dawson, who wrote, "Have we become so impressed by the world's systems of strategizing that we fail to avail ourselves of the simple method of waiting on God, listening to His voice, praying out His thoughts, and obeying what the Master Strategist says?"

We see a similar result of prayer in the church at Antioch where the leaders of the congregation met to fast, pray and worship. In the midst of their prayers, God initiated an outreach that would take the gospel where it had never been preached before (Acts 13:1-3). That prayer meeting in Antioch released the missionary team of Paul and Barnabas into the world. What impact could our prayer meetings have on reaching the lost?

Let's take a brief look at another prayer meeting in the book of Acts. Acts 4:24-31 gives us a thorough presentation of the events leading up to the prayer meeting, a transcription of what the disciples prayed, and then a description of the awesome results of their prayer. Peter and John had been arrested for preaching, held in jail, and then ordered by the Sanhedrin never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Upon their release, they returned to the believers and reported the threats made against them. The assembled believers responded by turning the matter over to their Lord in prayer.

They began praying by acknowledging the power of God who created all things. They continued by affirming the truth of Scripture, especially as they saw it being fulfilled in their lives. They quoted the first two verses of Psalm 2 back to God in prayer, and applied those verses to the situation that Jesus faced when spiritual and governmental leaders opposed his ministry. "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." They also recognized the threats they currently faced as part of that same opposition.

Until this point in the prayer, the disciples had asked for nothing. But in Acts 4:29 they asked for boldness from God to continue preaching the good news of Jesus in spite of the authorities' threats. "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

The disciples used Psalm 2 as a beginning place for their prayer by quoting from it, then concluded their prayer request by asking God to fulfill that Psalm in their lives. There's more to the second Psalm than the two verses quoted. In this great Messianic Psalm, God the Father speaks to the Son and says, in verse 8: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." In praying for boldness to continue to speak the Word of God, these early Christians were praying Scripture back to God in a powerful way, asking him to help fulfill that promise to the Son through them. Praying the Word of God is a powerful and effective way to make sure our prayers line up with God's desires.

The result of their prayer? The place where they were meeting was shaken as God showed his pleasure with their request. And that request was answered powerfully, for verse 31 says, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." The same God has the same purpose and desire today: that the ends of the earth might hear the good news of Jesus.

And when we, the church today, line our prayers up with the heartbeat of God and ask him to grant us boldness to fulfill his purposes, we too will see his power poured out in awesome ways upon the church of Jesus Christ.

–Dave Butts (1953-2022) was the president of Harvest Prayer Ministries, and the author of multiple books, articles and resources on prayer. Some of his books are [Prayer, Peace and the Presence of God](#), [The Giving Church](#), and [Prayer Ministry Volunteer Handbook](#) co-authored with his wife, Kim.