

Reaching Out by Reaching Up



The Power of Prayer Evangelism

By Alvin VanderGriend

A pastor in California led his family to pray for yet-to-be-followers of Christ who lived in five neighboring homes. Within the first eight weeks of prayer, one of their neighbors began asking faith questions and ended up committing her life to Christ. Another neighbor wanted to give up drug dealing and asked for prayer help. A non-churched couple living next door asked the pastor to start a neighborhood Bible study.

The family continued to pray.

By the six-month mark the couple who asked for a Bible study had given their lives to Christ. A Buddhist family who lived across the street was coming to church regularly, and one member of the family had become a Christ-follower. The children of both families were involved in the church's education classes.

This pastor's family discovered the power of prayer evangelism.

What Is Prayer Evangelism?

Prayer evangelism is a form of evangelism in which God moves in the hearts and lives of yet-to-be-followers of Christ in response to the earnest prayers of believers. Intercessors, with access to the throne of God, plead with the Father on behalf of those who lack that access.

And then, believers with access to prayed-for persons who do not know Christ, now stand ready to share the good news with those who are prepared to hear.

Why Pray for the Unsaved?

God wants us to pray for unsaved persons. Christ modeled prayer for yet-to-be-believers. The day before He was crucified, He said to the Father, ". . . I pray also for those who will believe in me through [the disciples'] message" (John 17:20). Paul was moved to pray for his fellow countrymen: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites, is that they may be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

God's Word urges us to make "requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving . . . for everyone," with the awareness that, "God our Savior . . . wants all [persons] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4). Prayer for unsaved persons is a high priority.

Prayer is the way Christ chooses to work in the world today. When the disciples worried they would fail if Jesus left them, He assured them that they would do "even greater things" than He had done, "because" He said, "I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name. . . ." (John 14:12-13).

When Christ acts in response to our prayers, people get saved.

Why Prayer Evangelism Works

Not only is prayer evangelism biblical—it is also powerful! There are several reasons why combining prayer with evangelistic efforts produces great results.

Praying for others changes the person praying. Praying for others changed me. To be effective for God I needed to become more deeply concerned for the spiritual well-being of others, more aware of God's heart for them. What I found was that the more I prayed for yet-to-be-followers of Christ, the more I cared. The more I cared, the harder I prayed. The harder I prayed, the more I wanted God's best for them and the more effective I was in reaching out to them.

Prayer doesn't just change things. It changes people—especially the people who pray.

Prayer for others builds relationships. Most people who come to Christ come because they have a relationship with a bona fide Christian—a relationship in which the love of Christ is not only communicated but demonstrated. Intercession builds relational bridges—bridges of love that connect us to the persons we pray for and connect the persons we pray for to Christ.

Prayer gains access where hearts are closed. People may refuse to open a Bible. They may turn a blind eye to what can clearly be seen in the things God has made. They may brush off the testimony of believers and spurn the church. They may close their hearts and minds to the gospel. But they can't keep the Spirit from moving in their hearts—the Spirit who moves when God's people pray.

The unknown author of *Kneeling Christian* said it best, "Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons, but they are helpless against our prayers."

Prayer evangelism is simple, flexible, and do-able. I can pray for yet-to-be-followers of Christ whether I am alone, with my family, with a small group, or with my whole church. My prayers can focus on friends, family members, neighbors, or coworkers. I can pray at home, in a restaurant, at my workplace, or on the move. Prayer evangelism is simply a matter of talking to God about the “lost sheep” who are all around us, lost sheep that Christ wants to bring home. No one can honestly say, “I don’t know when, where, or how to pray.” Opportunities are everywhere.

What Prayer Evangelism Requires

Prayer evangelism requires a burdened heart. Burden is one of our strongest motivations to pray for unsaved persons. Jesus’ call to pray for harvesters arose out of His burden for “harassed and helpless” sheep. Paul’s fervent prayer for fellow Israelites sprang from his “heart’s desire . . . that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1). Prayers without burden are lifeless and perfunctory.

When Salvation Army workers reported their failure to win souls, their leader William Booth proposed a two-word solution: “Try tears.” Burdened hearts love the lost. Burdened hearts weep. Burdened hearts pray fervently and powerfully.

Prayer evangelism requires perseverance. Jesus applauded the shameless perseverance of the man who went to his neighbor to plead for bread to give his friend who had come at midnight. I am sure that he also applauded the persevering evangelistic prayers of George Mueller. Mueller began in 1844 to pray daily for five individuals who did not know the Lord. One by one they came to the Lord as Mueller persisted in prayer. The last of the five came to faith shortly after Mueller’s death, more than 63 years after he first began to pray.

Mueller understood perseverance. He just didn’t quit.

Our best evangelistic prayers are Scripture prayers. Since “no

one can come to [Jesus] unless the Father . . . draws him," Scripture prayer means praying that the Father will draw them (John 6:44). Since the evil one snatches away gospel seed sown in the hearts of people, Scripture prayer means praying that they will "hear the word and understand it" (Matt. 13:23). Since the "god of this age" blinds the minds of unbelievers, it also means praying that they will be unblinded and will "see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). God loves to hear us pray His purposes back to Him.

Prayer evangelism is spiritual warfare. Satan—the strong man—is determined to keep his captives bound. Christ, who is able to bind the strong man, wants them set free. Warfare prayer, according to Wesley Duewel is, "joining Christ in driving out and defeating Satan and in setting his captives free" (Touch the World through Prayer, p. 208). We do the praying. Christ does the freeing. It's not prayer that defeats Satan. It's Christ who defeats Satan in response to our prayers. He binds the strong man and sets captives free.

Prayer evangelism requires the Word of God. It's not enough just to pray. If there is to be a spiritual harvest, people need to hear the Word of God. "Faith comes by hearing" said Paul, and "hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). People can't "hear" the word unless the Holy Spirit opens their ears and their hearts. Our prayers move the Spirit to do just that. And that word, God decrees, "will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire" (Isa. 55:11). That's a promise—God's promise!

Where Prayer Evangelism Works

It works person to person. Norm began praying regularly for John, an annoying neighbor, who he didn't like very much. The first thing God did as Norm prayed was to change his own heart. He began to feel genuine concern for John. In a "chance" meeting John reported that he had started going to church, and Norm responded, "Great! I want you to know that I

have been praying for you.”

Next, John asked Norm to suggest a Christian book for him to read. Norm gave him *More Than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell. Then, to Norm’s surprise, John accepted the Lord, joined the church, and was reunited with his divorced wife who had also come to know the Lord. Norm’s reaction: “I am grateful that through prayer God not only changed John’s life for eternity, but He also changed me.”

It works family to family. A family placed the names of each of their neighbors in a jar. Each day at dinner they pulled out a name and prayed as a family for that neighbor. One week they pulled out the same neighbor’s name three days in a row. Wondering if God was sending them a message, they visited this home and found that the father had abandoned the family three days earlier. With this new awareness they prayed fervently for the needs of the abandoned family. Not long afterward the father returned home and reunited with his family. Prayer can change families.

It works in small groups. A prayer triplet is a small group in which each person presents the names of three persons he or she knows who have yet to follow Christ. The triplet members pray daily on their own for the nine persons named and come together once a week for mutual prayer. Any existing small group can choose to use prayer triplets. Group members agree to pray faithfully for those named, to report progress to each other, and to plan activities that might appeal to those being prayed for. God is pleased to hear our “agreeing” prayers.

It works in neighborhoods. A church in Bakersfield, CA, planted eight prayer cells in high-need apartment complexes near the church. As prayers mounted up, things began to change. Residents of the complexes began helping each other. An out-of-control boy got turned around. Drug dealers moved out. A prostitute was converted and gave up her lifestyle.

Several of the residents started going to church. Eighteen young people became involved in the church's youth ministries. A couple of new Bible studies started in the complexes. Ten persons made commitments to Christ. Crime rates came down so dramatically that the police asked the church to consider planting prayer cells in other neighborhoods.

It works in whole churches. A 1,200-member church in southern California challenged its members to pray for family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who were not yet followers of Christ. The church provided prayer guides and regularly encouraged outreach prayer in their worship services. As a result the church began to see a steady stream of new converts. At the end of one full year of outreach prayer they had recorded 430 new commitments to Christ. Most of them had been prayed for by name by church members. Their prayers were the key to effective evangelism.

It works in whole denominations. Some years ago the Evangelical Covenant Church, a fellowship of about 110,000 members, initiated a denomination-wide emphasis to pray by name for yet-to-be-followers of Christ. At the denomination's annual conference, members submitted the names of 394,000 persons who were being prayed for. One year later the denomination reported 11,600 decisions for Christ, which represents 11 new faith commitments for every 100 members. That is a conversion rate approximately seven times greater than the average in America. Prayer paved the way.

Rapid and Fearless Pace

Something happens when people pray for unsaved persons in their spheres of influence—something that wouldn't have happened if they hadn't prayed. I think E. M. Bounds had it right when he said, "The gospel moves at slow and timid pace when the saints are not at their prayers early, long, and late."

If that is true, then wouldn't it also be true to say that the gospel will move at rapid and fearless pace when God's people are at their prayers early, long, and late? I think so!

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