

PERSEVERING TOGETHER IN PRAYER

Book of Acts

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I grew-up in the Church of Christ. I know of no other church life than that among Churches of Christ. I am thankful for my religious heritage and I have no intention of forsaking it. This does not mean, however, that I believe that we are right about everything or that we are the only ones who are right or even that we are more right than everyone else. I do believe that we are among God's people and that together, with my family of God, I can walk the pathway to God's home.

I remember when Wednesday Night was called "Prayer Meeting"; but I do not remember ever actually meeting to pray. Of course, there were occasional "special services," but Wednesday Night was usually a prayer-less meeting except for the closing prayer. Now, we use the term "Wednesday Night Bible Study." Bible study is good. But when do we pray?

I remember Leroy Brownlow's book *Why I Am a Member of the Church of Christ*, copyright 1945. There is a chapter on prayer in which Brownlow writes, ". . . no group of people can be identified as the apostolic church unless prayer has the scriptural and proper place in the function of that body."¹ Brownlow's focus, however, was on praying rightly rather than on praying regularly. He states, "Many religious bodies which have emphasized the importance of prayer have never preached the specified, scriptural conditions men must meet before their prayers will be heard. Let us not forget that men can pray and not be heard."² I remember an emphasis on praying the right way as opposed to all others who prayed the wrong way. Those "others" who prayed more than we did just prayed wrongly more often than we prayed rightly.

¹Leroy Brownlow, *Why I Am a Member of the Church of Christ* (Leroy Brownlow, 1945), 125-126.

²Brownlow, *Why I Am a Member of the Church of Christ*, 126-127.

In 1981, I remember the publication of the book *Introducing the Church of Christ*.³ This book discussed the so-called “distinctive features” of the Church of Christ. There are fifty-two chapters and one of them is on prayer. It is a fairly good summary; but again, the emphasis was on doing it right rather than doing it often.

When I was in graduate school, I went on a “Missions Retreat” with Dow Merritt. Brother Merritt traveled to Africa in 1926 where he served as a missionary in Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) for fifty years. He had been trained as a medical corpsman in the Navy. His ministry involved not only evangelizing and establishing schools, he also established a clinic and cared for the sick.⁴ At this retreat, even though Brother Merritt was well-advanced in years, his wisdom and wit were wonderful. I especially remember his response to the question as to how the Church of Christ compared with the other churches in the area. He said, “Well . . . they tithed and we don’t. They use instrumental music and we don’t. They pray and we don’t.”

I could cite more examples, but these three are enough to make my point. *It seems to me that when it comes to prayer we should “just do it!” I will let God worry about whom He will hear.* “The times, they are a-changin’”—and for that I am thankful. Today, within the Churches of Christ, much more is being said and written about the need and necessity of prayer; hopefully, this will lead to more praying.

The Book of Acts is the story of the church. The story of the church is the story of prayer. Luke goes to great pains to demonstrate that the church does what Jesus did. “As the disciples witness for Jesus, they become one with Him. His ministry becomes their ministry—His prayers, their prayers; His courage, their courage.”⁵

Over thirty times in Acts, Luke characterizes Jesus’ followers as being at prayer or he narrates episodes of prayer. These scenes are most prevalent in the first half of the book.

³John Waddey, ed., *Introducing the Church of Christ: Distinctive Features of the Church of Christ Discussed by Over Fifty of Her Ministers* (Star Bible, 1981).

⁴See Dow Merritt, *The Dew Breakers* (J. C. Choate, 1980).

⁵Gary Holloway, *In the Name of Jesus: Receiving Power from the Prayers of the New Testament*, A Faith Focus Book (Sweet, 1994), 71.

It is as though having established a pattern of pervasive prayer, Luke has no need to repeat himself again and again.⁶

This sermon is my fifth and final in this series on the subject of prayer. If you recall, the first lesson was a study of Jesus' prayer-life in the Gospel of Luke. *We noted that Luke highlights the prominence of prayer in the ministry of Jesus by emphasizing its role at every critical turning-point.* Whenever Jesus faced a fork in the road, prayer guided Him down the right path. The same pattern holds true in Acts.⁷ The disciples prayed before the selection of Matthias (1:24), before the seven were appointed (6:6), before the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit (8:15), before the revelation that the Gentiles were acceptable (10:9), before the church at Antioch sent out Saul and Barnabas on the Gentile mission (13:3), and before the appointment of leaders in the churches (14:23). Peter and Paul are both presented as praying before major events in their lives. Several of these prayers are parallels to the prayers of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Jesus is at prayer when He receives the Holy Spirit as are the disciples in Acts, Jesus prayed before selecting the twelve just as the early disciples do before the selection of Matthias, and both Jesus and Stephen asked to be received in death. *The conclusion is inescapable: the early church prayed as Jesus prayed. To be a church of Christ is to be a church of prayer.* The first reference to prayer in Acts comes in the summary statement of 1:12-14:

^{1:12}Then they returned to Jerusalem [after having witnessed the ascension of Jesus Christ] from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city [about three-fourths of a mile]. ¹³When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers (Acts 1:12-14, NIV).

The disciples are defined in verse 14 by their tenacious orientation toward a common purpose—they were single-minded in giving themselves to prayer. Although Luke does

⁶Joel B. Green, "Persevering Together in Prayer: The Significance of Prayer in the Acts of the Apostles," in R. N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, McMaster New Testament Studies (Eerdmans, 2001), 184.

⁷The following succinct summary is taken from Greg Sterling, "'Pray Always': Prayer in Luke/Acts" in D. Fleece and D. Bland, eds., *Preaching from Luke/Acts*, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching (ACU Press, 2002), 81-82.

not tell us the content of this ceaseless prayer, the context suggests that this is prayer in anticipation of the promised Holy Spirit.

The second summary in Acts, 2:42-47, also lists prayer as a defining characteristic of the early church. The growing company of believers is said to have “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (v. 42). So characteristic to the identity of the early Christians was prayer and the fact that it was christocentric—that is, centered on Christ—that they can be known as “those who call upon the name” of Jesus (cf. 2:21; 7:59; 9:14, 21; 22:16).

In Acts 6, when due to the rapidly increasing number of disciples a problem arose with the daily distribution of bread to the needy, the Twelve counseled the church:

^{6:3}“Brothers [and Sisters], choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3-4, NIV).

Caring for the poor is an act close to the heart of God, but so is prayer. The early church neglected neither.

In the face of persecution and hardship, the believers responded with prayer. One such significant episode takes place on the occasion of Peter and John’s release from trail before the Jewish authorities, in Acts 4.

^{4:23}On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

““Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the Lord
and against his Anointed One.’

²⁷Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:23-30, NIV).

What an amazing prayer! The early Christians did not ask God to remove the persecution; they asked God to refuse to allow His work of redemption to be thwarted. They asked for boldness in the face of hardship. They prayed not for lighter burdens but for stronger backs. And what was the result?

^{4:31}After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31, NIV).

Today's church needs to be shaken. Today's church needs boldness. *If we are not bold before others it may be because we have not bowed before God.*

The Apostle Paul in his speech of defense in Acts 22, having recounted his experience on the Damascus road, goes on to report:

^{22:17}“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸and saw the Lord speaking. ‘Quick!’ he said to me. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’

¹⁹“‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

²¹“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles’” (Acts 22:17-21, NIV).

Here is a fail-proof defense for Paul's mission. It was in the Jerusalem temple, while praying, that Paul received the divine mandate to take the gospel to the Gentile world. His purpose in preaching came from his practice of praying. If any of us here today have any doubts about the purpose of the church, we need to begin to dispel those doubts by praying. *Clarity of vision comes from constancy in prayer.* If we want to open our eyes to perceive, we must first close our eyes to pray.

There is one final observation I would like to draw from the Book of Acts (and we have only touched the tip of the iceberg in today's lesson). The custom of the laying on of hands may seem, at first glance, to signify that some power inherent in the apostles is passed on to someone else. However, laying on of hands is always accompanied by prayer. Laying on of hands with prayer signifies that the action taking place is done not by men, but by God. The power comes not from human beings, but from God and Christ, through the Spirit.

I began this series of sermons on prayer with the confession that I was preaching them for me. I have prayed more, but not nearly enough. I have seen my prayers answered, and that has scared me. Why? Because I am learning to pray “not my will, but God’s will be done.” It is not easy submitting my wants and wishes to the sovereign will of God. It is not easy to change from getting what I want to wanting what I get.

If it is true, physically speaking, that “you are what you eat,” then, spiritually speaking, “you are what you pray.” Perhaps, more than anything else, what makes us the church *of Christ* is whether or not we are a people who constantly call upon His name. *To call ourselves by His name and not call upon His name, is to take the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in vain.*

Prayer—it is here that the church expresses her deepest convictions and commitments about Christ. Prayer—it is here that the church reveals her dearest dreams and desires about God’s kingdom. Prayer—it is here that the church surrenders and submits her will to the will of God, so that God’s will may be done on earth—in *the church*—as it is in heaven. Prayer—it is in praying as Christ prayed that we become His church, the Church of Christ.