

January/February 2008, Volume 5, Issue 1

Editor's Note

Didn't Jesus say something about the hypocrites who pray on street corners to be heard by men? So why is the 9Marks eJournal printing the corporate prayers of several individuals from Capitol Hill Baptist Church?

Forgive me for presumption in presenting the prayers of one's own church as a model (none of them are mine); my hope is merely to share with pastors a sample of the richness I have personally benefited from since 1996. Set aside if you can any concerns you might have about formality, style, or culture. Pay attention instead to how big and holy and loving the God of these prayers is. Consider the strength and comfort a congregation would find as it listens to its leaders pray this way. Think about how they will learn to pray in turn. Think about the church's unity.

Pay attention especially to the two pastoral prayers, and consider what it means to teach your church how to pray like—forgive my boast in my pastor—a globally-thinking and loving Christian.

I trust and rejoice that many pastors will find nothing surprising here because they already pray this way. But if you don't pray with such depth, let me encourage you to consider the samples presented here. Except for the book reviews, everything else in this issue should help you to see why. Christians used to take greater care in their prayers. We need to again. (See

Johnson and Duncan's brief and convicting history of the matter in ch. 7, *Give Praise to God*, P&R.)

To get you started, here's what Philip Graham Ryken has said about his time as an intern at the renowned William Still's Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, Scotland: "Back in 1992 it was typical for a member of that church to thank God for the way he had brought down the Iron Curtain of communism in eastern Europe. From the way that they prayed, it was clear that they believed that *their* prayers had something to do with the collapse of the Soviet Empire. I was tempted to pull one of them aside and say, 'You know, it was a little more complicated than that. The global economy had something to do with it, not to mention the arms race and the spiritual bankruptcy of communism. It took more than your prayers to pull down the Berlin Wall.'

"I was tempted to say such a thing, but I knew better. Who is to say what part a praying church actually plays in world affairs? To go to Gilcomston on a Saturday night was to know what was going on in the world. The prayers of God's people really are at the heart of what God is doing. When the true history of the world is finally written, we will discover that Christians like the ones in Aberdeen had a profound influence on world events" (P. G. Ryken, *Jeremiah & Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope*, Crossway, pp. 390-91).

—Jonathan Leeman

CORPORATE PRAYER



On the Use and Importance of Corporate Prayer

Here's how one pastor thinks through the use of corporate prayer for his church's gatherings.

An Interview with Mark Dever

Page 5



A Biblical Theology of Corporate Prayer

Page 10

How corporate prayer is really a shadow and a type of the gospel itself.

By James M. Hamilton Jr. and Jonathan Leeman



Recommendations for Improving Public Prayer

Page 13

A compelling case for why Scriptural prayers and planned prayers are best for the congregation.

By Terry L. Johnson and J. Ligon Duncan III



Corporate Aspects of the Lord's Prayer

Page 20

With the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray both with one another and for one another.

By Philip Graham Ryken



Thirty Two Principles for Public Prayer

Page 22

Eighteen things *not* to do and fourteen things *to* do when praying publicly.

By J. Ligon Duncan III (following Samuel Miller)

A CORPORATE PRAYER TOOLBOX

Sample Corporate Prayers from December 2, 2007

Page 25

Here are lightly edited transcriptions of the prayers of praise, confession, intercession, and thanksgiving by several men from Capitol Hill Baptist Church one recent Sunday morning.

Sample Corporate Prayers from December 9, 2007

Page 28

Here are lightly edited transcriptions of the prayers of praise, confession, intercession, and thanksgiving by several men from Capitol Hill Baptist Church one recent Sunday morning.

Sample Sunday School Class—On Corporate Prayer

Page 31

Here is the manuscript from a Sunday School class taught at Capitol Hill Baptist Church from the internally-written "Living as a Church" series.

BOOK REVIEWS

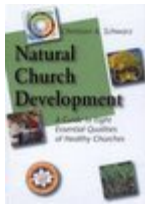


Book Reviews:

Page 38

Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did; also, Corner Conversations: Engaging Dialogues About God and Life, by Randy Newman

Reviewed by Byron Straughn



Book Review:
Natural Church Development
by Christian Schwarz
Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Page 41



Book Review:
Advanced Strategic Planning
by Aubrey Malphurs
Reviewed by Owen Strachan

Page 44

AUDIO—LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS

Pastoral Ministry with Eric Redmond

Posted 12/1/2007 at <http://resources.christianity.com/default/mrki.aspx>

Pastor Eric Redmond recounts his own pastoral experience as well as some of the challenges of inter-ethnic and economic ministry.

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On the Use and Importance of Corporate Prayer

An Interview with Mark Dever

SIGNIFICANCE OF CORPORATE PRAYER

What's the difference between individual prayer and corporate prayer?

In individual prayer, I am simply responding to God myself—my own knowledge of him, my relationship with him, my experience with him. In corporate prayer, when somebody opens their mouth to pray for a whole group of people, then the person leading has to think not just for themselves but they have to think, "What does this Bible study group, or what does my family, or what does this local church need to praise God for, thank him for, confess and ask him for right now?"

In corporate prayer is the person praying speaking to God, to people, or to both?

To both. People don't think about that sometimes. You know, it's like when somebody talks about someone else praying in a quiet voice, and then the person who did the praying responds in a sort of self-righteous way, "I wasn't talking to you." Well, actually, if you're praying out loud you are talking to them in part. You see this in the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. You'll see that in the Psalms, too. Basically if you're opening your mouth and asking us to close ours, then you are in part speaking to us. And you just have to take account of that fact.

So practically, if you're the person leading that prayer, pray "We," not "I." You may occasionally pray "I," but generally you should pray "we" because you're representing yourself and all those other people before the Lord.

Let me follow up on a point you were just making about seeing corporate prayer exemplified in Scripture. Since it's based in Scripture, is corporate prayer something pastors should—normatively should—be doing?

Oh, yeah. It's the example you see in Acts. Also, Paul exhorts Timothy to do this in his correspondence with him. Yeah, definitely.

Is the church that fails to take corporate prayer seriously depriving its members of something?

Yes, I think you deprive yourself and your members of one of those key parts of what your identity is as Christians. Paul tells the Corinthians that we have the same Spirit in us, and corporate prayer is a wonderful acting-out of the ontological unity that we have spiritually as we literally speak with one voice to God. To deny that, and to instead view the church's gathering as your quiet time with five hundred other people, is to miss out. It screens out the local church from the reality experienced as a Christian. It's an impoverishment.

So what are some of the benefits for the individual Christian of corporate prayer? Here I am; I'm a member of a congregation; I'm sitting here participating in this corporate prayer—what are the benefits for me? How will I grow in grace?

Participating regularly in corporate prayer begins to take out the individualistic assumption that Christianity is only about me and my relationship with God; and it begins to re-situate us as individual Christians in the congregation so that we become aware of this person who's sick, this person who's just had a baby, this person who's unemployed, this person who's just become a Christian. Participating in corporate prayer helps us discover that our lives as followers of Christ are tied up with one another's. It helps us discover how God cares about the congregation as an entity—that it should be marked by the fruit of the Spirit and the love of John 13:34-35.

That's not how Christians in America normally talk. You hear about "my own spiritual desires and demands"; you don't really hear about the local congregation's desires and demands. But regularly participating in corporate prayer reintroduces these ideas and reorients our thinking.

So it works against disunity.

Yes, among many other things. It works against disunity because you begin to realize that that person that you are disregarding, mocking, or dismissing is actually part of your own body. You have to approach them and their problems—even when you disagree with them—differently than you would before.

Including owning their...

Yes, it's not "their problem," it's "our problem." This pulls you into church discipline. It pulls you into correcting other people. It pulls you into other aspects of life together because you tangle your life up with theirs.

To what extent are you conscious of pastoring the people as you pray?

I am really aware of that when I'm preparing a prayer. I won't write out a manuscript, but I'll make notes of what I want to pray for and while I'm doing this I will think along these lines. When I'm actually praying, though, I am really aware of being in the presence of God, and I'm only secondarily thinking about the people.

Are you saying that you're more aware of being in God's presence when you lead in corporate pray than when you pray individually?

Oh, yeah! I'm highly aware of—you know—"Lord, here we are in your presence at CHBC, and here's what we would like to talk to you about." Yes, I feel very conspicuous.

More than when you preach?

Similarly or more. Certainly not less. I mean, I feel like I've walked up to the Chief Shepherd, and I'm his little undershepherd. And I've got all these sheep, and I'm trying to get them to, sh-h-h-h, pay attention now, you know, I kind of feel like that. I hope I'm not now ruining your experience of the pastoral prayers here at CHBC with distracting images.

Oh, not at all...What are you trying to teach people through your corporate prayer about their individual prayer lives? What would you want them to replicate?

I got a great letter once from a member who was a new Christian, saying that she had learned how to pray in her own personal devotional life from being in the services at CHBC. In fact she had even learned how to pray in public by listening to the different prayers that were prayed. So I would hope that we would model different aspects of our relationship with God by the prayers that we have in public.

SUNDAY MORNING GATHERING

So, getting practical, you have two different services—the Sunday morning and the Sunday evening service. Let's start with Sunday morning. What do you do on Sunday mornings?

We certainly think that different churches have freedom to do it different ways. But at Capitol Hill Baptist we will always have a **prayer of praise** (which is focused on some aspect of God), a **prayer of confession** (where we confess our sins), a **prayer of intercession/pastoral prayer** (where we pray through various concerns that we have as a church family), and a brief **prayer of thanks**. There will also be a prayer after the sermon in which we try to pray certain truths into our hearts; and there will sometimes be a brief prayer of invitation for God's presence at the beginning of our service.

You mentioned prayers of praise, confession, intercession, and thanks, which is basically what we see listed in the bulletin every week. But the Psalms have more than just these four categories. There are also prayers of lament, remembrance, and more. Would you ever do a prayer of lament? Why do you camp on those four?

Some of the things that the Psalms illustrates for us are contained in individual prayers. So they're not all prayers that will be normal in the corporate worship. Having said that, a prayer of lament certainly can be appropriate publicly and corporately, and I think we certainly would have elements of that.

Prayers of remembrance?

Yes, and that happens in the prayer of praise often. But back to the prayer of lament—I think that in my own pastoral prayers, at the end, sometimes I'll reflect on what we Christians are and how our culture understands us, and I'll lament that.

Any further comments on what you want accomplished in the prayer of praise?

We try to distinguish it from just a prayer of thanks. The prayer of thanks is me thanking God for something that he's given me. A prayer of praise is a prayer acknowledging an aspect of God's character that's been revealed to us. So we might praise him that he is a saving God; whereas we might thank him for his salvation of us. We would praise him that he is a revealing God—that he, in and of himself wants to make himself known—whereas we might thank him for giving us the gift of his Word and his Spirit—things like that. So I think it's good to help us to think of God as the Bible reveals him to us even before we meditate on what he's done for us.

So for the few theological nitpickers out there who I've heard try to demolish the distinction between thanks and praise by saying, "We only know him through his economy of redemption," you're still going to say . . .

That he has revealed more about himself than merely the economy of redemption.

What's being accomplished in the prayer of confession?

We certainly can't confess every sin that we've committed. But we mean to lead the congregation in thinking about their lives before the Lord, especially in light of whatever text the church will be studying that particular morning. So it's meant to encourage self-examination and to help us meditate on God's holiness and how that matches with the lives we've been leading. Then at the end, with the entire bill being totaled up, as it were, we ask for his forgiveness in the name of Christ.

Which you then conclude with...

Well, after the prayer for forgiveness for our sins, we read an assurance of pardon from Scripture. We don't do that as priests saying, "I absolve you." But we do quote from God's Word on how God gives us forgiveness through Christ. There are many great verses which assure the saints and instruct others.

Seven or eight years ago, I remember you said that you didn't do a prayer of confession every week because you were concerned about causing visiting or former Catholics to stumble, whereas now the practice is to do one every week. Why the change?

I just got to thinking about it and decided the damage of not doing a weekly prayer of confession was greater than the risk of doing one.

Gotcha.

Yeah, and we might change it back at some point. I don't know. But I think it seems like a good, healthy part of church life.

Will you walk me through your pastoral prayer? You seem to take an extended time on that. What do you do, and why you do it?

Let me start with the "why." I think the pastoral prayer is important for showing ourselves and others that the church is not doing what we appear to be doing, but that all this is God's work. Ultimately, everything that we do is dependent upon God and his grace, his mercy, his action. So I think the time given to intercession is a proper, appropriate, worshipful, thankful expression of dependency, and it's a good and right thing for Christians to do.

It's a form of praise.

It is. It's another form of praise as we confess our neediness. And we confess it out loud and publicly because we're confident of his sufficiency and of his good will toward us in Christ.

You often state that at the beginning of your prayers.

I'll sometimes say something like that. Other times I'll begin with a statement from a prayer of Daniel's in Daniel 9 where Daniel calls on God to act and to answer for the sake of his name.

I'll begin my requests by asking the Lord to intervene in situations that will be strikingly on the mind of the congregation if some member has recently been married or died or if there's a situation that the whole congregation's aware of.

Then I'll pray for other classes of people: maybe the unemployed, maybe those longing to have children, something like that. Sometimes I'll pray for members by name.

And then I'll pray for those in authority over us, and I'll pray for two or three things about our city or nation that are at stake. I often pray for the schools. I think the public schools are a very important part of the future in this country. Part of what praying for our authorities means very practically is praying for those who have authority in the public schools.

Then I will pray for those who have gone out from us to preach the gospel, which for us means missionaries, seminarians, and pastors.

I'll also pray for at least one other church by name and its pastor. Sometimes it'll be another Baptist church, but more often than not it will be a church of another denomination. Usually it will be a church in our own area, but sometimes I pray for specific churches or ministries outside of this area.

Then I will pray for a number of different countries. Sometimes I'll pray for their governments; sometimes for religious freedoms; certainly for the spread of the gospel.

I try occasionally to thank God, because he has done so much to answer our prayers. It seems appropriate to remember that when publicly praying, lest we make it look like we're beggars because he doesn't greatly give to us, when he does. I know we've already had the prayer of praise and we'll have a prayer of thanks, but I just want to thank him a little bit here, too.

Finally, I will pray for Christians to be marked by certain characteristics, including our own congregation. And here I'll usually pray through the points of the sermon for us as a congregation. I pray that God would help us to hear, understand, and change.

How can a pastor get from a place where the Sunday morning gathering has one or two undefined prayers to having these three or four defined prayers every Sunday morning?

He should just start planning it into the service. He can teach on it in his sermons, as he has opportunity to mention prayer; quickly explain why he's doing these different things. Part of what prevents pastors from doing this, though, is the larger issue of thinking of the service like they're on TV time—no wasted time, no wasted space. So teach them, "Look, we're not about that. It doesn't matter if we get done at 12:00 or not."

OTHER NUTS & BOLTS

How long are your pastoral prayers?

I don't know. My guess is 5 to 12 minutes.

How long are the other prayers—the prayer of praise and of confession?

The prayer of praise, I'd guess, is like 4 to 7 minutes. The confession is a little shorter, like 4 to 6 minutes, maybe.

A few moments ago, you said you make notes. Do you encourage guys to write out their prayers, or is spontaneity the better way to go?

There are advantages to both. What you want is sincerity, but you also want it to be well thought through. If you're able to think on your feet well and not distract your people but lead them to the Lord, that's great. But if you get tongue-tied and repeat yourself a lot, then I don't care if you're sincere to the point of crying, that's not best—generally—for leading public prayer.

So you don't have a problem with people writing out prayers?

No, it's fine. Now, if they read their prayers in a way that's distracting because it sounds like they're reading an essay, that's a problem.

Once we had a staff member who quoted Luther to the Lord, and told the Lord that he was quoting Luther: "Oh, Lord, as Luther once said..." We told him later, "you don't ever need to tell the Lord who said something again."

So if the person praying doesn't come across as if they're reading an essay to God, but that they genuinely perceive themselves to be praying, then I think that it's fine to have notes or a manuscript.

Earlier you said that when leading corporate prayer, we should pray "We" instead of "I." Any other practical tips for leading the congregation in corporate prayer?

Speak up, speak clearly. If you can't speak loudly and clearly, you're just frustrating the old people, and that's not kind.

Don't say heretical things.

Try to teach some godly friends in the congregation that it's a good thing for them to give you feedback—not to judge your relationship with God, but to help you better represent the Lord and teach people by your public prayers. It's appropriate for you to be humble enough to hear feedback from them.

SUNDAY EVENING PRAYER MEETING

Moving to the Sunday evening prayer service, how are your goals different for the evening service than the morning service as a time of corporate prayer?

People share various things, and I'll call on various folk to lead us in prayer for those things. So you hear more of a living body since it's not just the service leaders praying in monologue; it's a bunch of people praying.

Unlike many prayer services I've attended, people don't raise their hands and say, "Will you pray for this?" Instead, people come to you beforehand. I know it hasn't always been that way. How did you make that transition?

At first, our church had a normal Wednesday night prayer meeting where one old deacon prayed for all the sick people in the hospital, and then people put up hands and asked for unspoken concerns. So I tried to get them to move from praying about their uncle's cancer to their own cancer; and then from praying for their own cancer to their own spiritual life; and then from praying about their own spiritual life to their evangelism; and then from their evangelism to the church's evangelism. My goal has been to move their prayer to the more personal and spiritual, as well as to the corporate.

How did you do that?

I would tell people "no" when they wanted to pray for a sick baby.

Right, okay. Anything else?

I would say, "I'll pray. Thank you for telling me. Let me encourage you to get your small group to pray, or your friends." When they say, "Can I share tonight?" I'll say, "Um, no," and then I'd try to explain what I'm trying to do. It's the one time the church has to get together and pray about things that affect us as a church, so . . .

How did you transition from people raising their hands, "Pastor, will you pray . . . ?" to everybody understanding that they needed to come to you beforehand?

Well, they just saw that that's what happened. I think that everybody came to understand it pretty easily. And they appreciate it because they benefit from the work you as the pastor do of brush clearing. You're not going to have one guy talk for seventeen minutes about a situation nobody understands, leaving everyone else struggling in their carnal flesh wishing they could get out of there. People appreciate your work of making sure beforehand that that doesn't happen.

Somebody comes to you with something heavy on their heart—it's a neighbor or someone they love who has cancer. Any tips on how to pastorally respond with a "no"?

You pray with them right then. Encourage them in prayer. And ask them questions about their relationship with that person.

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A Biblical Theology of Corporate Prayer *By James M. Hamilton Jr. and Jonathan Leeman*

Biblical theology seeks to uncover the theology contained in the Bible itself, tracing the development of the Bible's themes through redemptive history in its canonical shape. This brief, inexhaustive consideration of the theme of corporate prayer will follow the salvation historical storyline as it unfolds from the Law, Prophets, and Writings of the Old Testament into the Gospels and Acts, the Letters, and the Apocalypse in the New. It will then offer several lessons for the Christian and the local church.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis deals mainly with patriarchs and their families, and so we do not find much material on corporate prayer until the people of God grow from a family to a nation. Nonetheless, we do see that the members of Noah's family are saved through the favor that God shows to one righteous man, Noah. We also see that God promises to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham. The salvation provided on the ark for the few based on their relationship with the one and the promises made to Abraham, first for a nation and then for the world, point to the covenantal structures that typify how God always relates to those whom he will save: First, the way of redemption will always be established through a mediator. Second, God always uses a mediator to save a people. The path of redemption in this world is not for lone, vainglorious explorers; it's traveled by pilgrims locked arm in arm, joined together both for the sake of giving and receiving aid on the journey but also, more than that, because their very identities are now joined by God.

Noah interceded between God and the people, as did Abraham. And it's this idea of intercession which gives life to the very idea of corporate prayer. Corporate prayer exists, in other words, because God has determined to grant his shalom-restoring covenants *through* a mediator and *to* a people.

In Exodus the people collectively groan (2:23) and worship (4:31; 12:27), and we begin to get descriptions of what they said and how they prayed. A detailed account of what "Moses and the people" sang in prayer to Yahweh is recounted in Exodus 15, after the Lord has delivered Israel from Egypt. This is something of a spontaneous example of worship. Definite patterns are introduced into Israel's corporate life at Sinai when they receive the Ten Commandments. Israel is not explicitly instructed to pray on the Sabbath, though it is likely that they were intended to use their time of rest meditating upon Yahweh's acts, expressing trust in him, and petitioning his continued mercy. (Psalm 92 seems to have been composed for the Sabbath.)

The covenantal context of corporate prayer—the stage set through Noah and Abraham—continues with Moses and the Levitical priesthood. In addition to Moses' prayer with and for the people in Exodus 15, it's worth noticing Moses' acts of intercession for the people when God threatened to destroy them entirely, even though it was not a "corporate prayer," per se (Ex. 32:11-13). As we often see in prayers recorded in the Bible, Moses appeals to the fact that God has tied his name to his people, thereby binding his glory before the onlooking nations to his people's salvation. In Leviticus, the high priest is instructed to pray what amounts to a representative prayer confessing the sins of all the people on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:21). In addition, all Israelite males are to appear before Yahweh thrice yearly for holy convocations (Lev. 23). The "Psalms of Ascent" (120–34) were apparently sung as the people went up to Jerusalem for various festivals. Once the Psalms were written, many of them were probably prayed and sung by the people on Sabbaths and other occasions of rejoicing before Yahweh (Deut. 16:11).

Joshua intercedes for the people when Achan sins (Josh. 7:6–9), the people cry out to Yahweh when they find themselves oppressed by other nations in Judges (Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6–7, etc.). Samuel intercedes for the nation when they want a king (1 Sam. 8) and reminds them of the way the Lord answered their prayers in the days of the Judges (1 Sam. 12:10–11); and the people urge Samuel to pray for them (12:19), which he promises to do as he says that Yahweh will not forsake them "for his great name's sake" (12:22–23).

The years of David's reign seem to have been a fertile period of corporate prayer, as the sweet Psalmist of Israel, who receives the blessing of a covenant from Yahweh, gave much of the Messiah's Prayer Book, the collection of Psalms, to the nation (see, e.g., the psalm in 1 Chron. 16). Solomon also leads the nation in prayer at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8). Elijah prays a public prayer in his confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36–37), but due to the selective nature of these narratives much of Israel's ordinary experience is passed over with little comment.

Commentary on the storyline that runs from Genesis through Kings comes in prophetic books such as Isaiah, through whom Yahweh declares that he does not listen to faithless prayer (Isa 1:15); Yahweh works for those who wait for him (64:4), those who tremble at his word (66:2).

When we look to the OT Writings, we find a great deal on corporate prayer, particularly in the Psalms spoken from the perspective of a first person plural ("we") narrator, such as Psalm 44. Not every Psalm is explicitly messianic, of course, but David's predominance over the Psalter, the messianic and Edenic connotations in Psalms 1 and 2, and the way the New Testament authors place the Psalms into the mouth of Jesus, which puts the appeals to the clean hands of a righteous man in a whole new light, are all hints that the Psalms must be prayed and sung by God's people as they identify with a righteous covenantal mediator (see Heb. 2:10-18; 5:5-10).

Writing after the exile, the Chronicler highlights Jehoshaphat's prayer and Yahweh's answering deliverance (2 Chron. 20), an event not recounted in Kings. Other post-exilic writings also showcase corporate prayers, sometimes with fasting, called for by Esther (Esth. 4:16), led by Ezra (Ezra 8:21-23; 9:1-15), Nehemiah, and Daniel (prayed on behalf of but perhaps not in the presence of the people, Neh 1:4-11; Dan. 9:1-19). Ezra's prayer appears to result in corporate repentance (Ezra 10), and the book of Nehemiah describes a corporate prayer confessing sin in response to the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 9:1-38). Interestingly, the prayers in Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9 are not only confessions of sin, they are themselves exercises in biblical theology as the narrative of Israel's history is rehearsed and interpreted in light of statements made in the Pentateuch (esp. Lev. and Deut.). An intricate celebration of praise and thanksgiving marks the dedication of the wall (Neh. 12).

Having taken a cursory glance at when corporate prayer happens in the Old Testament, we can point to a consistent emphasis in these pleas: that Yahweh would act for the sake of his great name, that he would glorify himself, and that he would do this by saving Israel through the judgment of their enemies. Surely, it's significant as well that the post-exilic Chronicler's genealogies culminate in the person of David (1 Chron. 10:14) and that his mediating, messianic figure, of all the ancient heroes, seems to loom largest at the close of Old Testament history.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we come to the New Testament, biblical history begins anew with the birth of a son of David and Abraham (Matt. 1:1), who will eventually plead before the Father to keep his disciples from the evil one, to sanctify them in truth, and to make them one (John 17:15-21). This mediator of a new covenant taught not just individuals but a people to pray. After all, they are united under one Father ("Our Father") and were to ask not just for their own bread and deliverance from temptation and evil, but for one another's ("Give us ...lead us...deliver us...", Matt. 6:9-13).

After the Day of Pentecost, the early church devoted itself, among other things, to "the prayers" (Acts 2:42). We have another corporate prayer that rehearses biblical theology in Acts 4:24-30, and a corporate prayer meeting is held as the people plead for Peter's release—a request the Lord grants (12:12-17). Corporate prayer and fasting also leads to the setting apart and sending out of Paul and Barnabas (13:1-3).

Paul states regulations for the behavior of men and women in corporate prayer in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and he asks the Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians to pray for his ministry (Rom. 15:30; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3-4; 1 Thess. 5:25). Among other things, corporate prayer should always be done in a manner that builds up the church (1 Cor. 14:16-17). He also instructs Timothy to lead the church in Ephesus to pray for all men, especially kings and those in high positions, and this is to be done without anger or quarrelling (1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8).

In the book of Revelation the saints who have gone before are corporately petitioning the Father to avenge their blood (Rev. 6:9-11). The prayers of the saints are incense before the throne of God (8:1-4), to which God responds with judgment upon his enemies (8:5-13). The church responds to the Revelation of Jesus Christ with the corporate prayer, "Come!" (22:17).

WHAT THIS THEOLOGY TEACHES US

When we look closely at these corporate prayers throughout the Old and New Testaments, we see much more than there is space here to discuss. In terms of what the saints are praying for, several things can be noted. First, it is God's sovereign power that summons forth prayer (see, e.g., God addressed as sovereign in corporate prayer in Acts 4:24 and Rev. 6:10, ESV). People pray to God because they believe that he is mighty to save, able to change the course of events, and willing to respond to the prayers of his people. Second, we often see confessions of the sin of the people and the righteousness of God in these corporate prayers. These prayers are laden with true theology and reminiscences of God's past faithfulness. Third, these corporate prayers almost universally call on God to do exactly what he has promised to do, whether that be to return the people from exile (e.g., Dan. 9) or to cause the gospel to advance through the bold testimony of God's people (Acts 4:29-30). When the Bible records what the people of God pray, it records them asking him to do what he has promised to do for the sake of his name. In short, God has always intended for his people to pray for his glory and their good.

Though we might fail to notice this in our individualized age, the Bible often assumes that God's people will pray together. What's significant about that fact?

A biblical theology of corporate prayer rests on the fact that God's people are called to submit their entire lives—which includes their words—to a covenantal mediator. Every sinful individual needs a man to speak on his or her behalf, whose words we can make our own—a man about whom we can say, "Yes, yes! He speaks for me. I couldn't say it, but he's saying it! O Great King in Heaven, listen *to him, for me.*" If redemption and the life of redemption hung on "my" prayers alone, what hope would any of us have? The prayer of a mediator to which a repenting people—God's people—can attach themselves is a clear provision of God's rich mercy. This makes the declaration that Christ Jesus is interceding for us at the right hand of the Father one of the most precious truths in all the Bible (Rom 8:34).

What specifically, then, does a biblical theology of prayer teach we who sit in the church pew, or folding chair, or stadium seating, or couch? It teaches us to listen intently to the person leading prayer, while repeating to God, "Yes, yes, that person speaks for me and all those around me." It teaches us not to be so arrogant as to think our religion hangs on our ability to articulate ourselves. It teaches us that the way of redemption requires us to lock arms with others, speaking for them when they can't speak and listening to them when we cannot speak. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

It reminds us that the impulses of our individual hearts are not always reliable guides—we need the mediator's intercession! It teaches us to submit our hearts to the praises, confessions, and intercessions of the mediator praying—and the Mediator who intercedes continually. It teaches us that God is so merciful and stoops so low that, not only does he lisp in words that we can understand, as Calvin said, he even places words of repentance and praise into our dumb, closed mouths. How gracious and kind and patient is he!

A biblical theology of corporate prayer teaches us that God's people will become what they are—united in Christ—as we learn to speak to the Lord together. Speaking together, after all, trains the desires of our hearts to be united in faith, united in hope, united in love. Corporate prayer in the church requires the church to agree, to be without division, to be of the same mind and judgment (1 Cor. 1:10). It's one way the church "stands firm in one spirit" and "with one mind strives side by side for the faith" (Phil. 1:27).

The corporate prayer of the pastor and his church, of the Bible study leader and her group of young mothers, of the father and his family, is a shadow and a type of the gospel itself—one person standing in for the many, making intercession for them (Heb. 7:25).

Which yields at least one more lesson for, not the people listening, but the person leading in corporate prayer: How slowly and reverently should Christians then approach the task of speaking on behalf of the many! How dangerous it is, apart from the blood of Christ, to stand in between God and sinners and to presume to speak for either party (see Lev. 10:1-3). Though Christians may approach God boldly to intercede for others, knowing that Christ's sacrifice has sufficiently cleared the way to the Father, surely they should always go with carefulness, preparation, study, earnestness, brokenness, and thanksgiving.

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Recommendations for Improving Public Prayer*

By Terry L. Johnson and J. Ligon Duncan III

Let us make several recommendations for the improvement of public prayer.

PRAY IN THE LANGUAGE OF SCRIPTURE

First, *pray in the language of Scripture*. Obviously this is our primary point. Listen to the voices from the past as they universally urge this practice. Matthew Henry says, "I would advise that the *sacred* dialect be most used, and made familiar to us and others in our dealing about *sacred* things; that language Christian people are most accustomed to, most affected with, and will most readily agree to." [1] Patrick Fairbairn urges that the whole prayer "should be cast much in the mould of Scripture, and should be marked by a free use of its language." [2] R.L. Dabney says, "Above all should the minister enrich his prayers with the language of Scripture," explaining,

Besides its inimitable beauty and simplicity, it is hallowed and sweet to every pious heart by a thousand associations. It satisfies the taste of all; its use effectually protects us against improprieties; it was doubtless given by the Holy Spirit to be a model for our devotions. Let it then abound in our prayers. [3]

Samuel Miller says,

One of the most essential excellencies in public prayer, and that which I feel constrained first of all, and above all to recommend, is, that it abound in the language of the word of God. [4]

Thomas Murphy says,

The prayer of the sanctuary should be thoroughly saturated with scriptural thought and expression. The language of the Bible is that which the Spirit prompted, and which must therefore be most in accordance with the mind of God. For the same reason it must be Bible language which is best calculated to express those devotional feelings which are the work of the Spirit in the heart. [5]

John Broadus counsels,

The minister should be consistently storing in his memory the more directly devotional expressions found everywhere in the Bible, and especially in the Psalms and Prophets, the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation...most of us greatly need in our prayers a larger and more varied infusion of Scripture language. [6]

But perhaps some are still unpersuaded, or are concerned that what worked in the past may not work today. Consider the following.

1. This is the pattern found in Scripture itself.

This is not merely the opinion of the Reformers or of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century evangelical theologians. It is also the pattern that we see in Scripture. The biblical saints learned God-pleasing devotional language from the Bible. They often used the language and themes of Scripture to interpret and express their experience. Consider for instance Moses seminal revelatory experience in Exodus 34:6,7.

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."

The echo of this revelation is heard on at least thirteen additional occasions in the Old Testament as later prophets learned from Moses how to praise God (Num 14:18; 2 Ch 30:9; Neh 9:17,31; Pss 103:8;111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:9; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; etc). As we have seen Mary at the annunciation drew upon the Song of Hannah (Lk 1:46-55, c.f., 1 Sam 2:1-10; Solomon at the dedication of the temple incorporated Psalm 132:8,9 (2 Ch. 6:40-42); Jesus on the cross used the words of Psalms 22:1

and 31:5 (Mt 27:46, Lk 23:46); and the early church in the face of persecution cited Psalms 146 and 2 (Acts 4:24-30). In each case the language of Scripture provided the language for prayer.

Where then are we to learn the language of Christian devotion if not from Scripture? That this is less than self-evident to a tradition whose defining principle has been that worship must be regulated by God's word is surprising indeed. Since our minds are "factories for idols," borrowing Calvin's phrase, we must be taught the language of prayer. Isn't that the point of the disciples' request of Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1)? Isn't that indeed the point of the Book of Psalms? Were the Psalms not provided to teach the people of God the language of devotion with which God is pleased? If Jesus in the supreme crisis of his life drew upon the Psalter in order to understand and express His devotion and experience, then we can do no less.

2. *There is a special efficacy in Scripture-based prayer.*

It then follows that *there is a special efficacy in Scripture-based prayer*. No prayers more accurately reflect the will of God than those which use the language which God Himself puts into our mouths. No request is more sure to be granted than that which expresses what God Himself has promised to fulfill. No petition is more sure to be answered than that which pleads for that which God already commands. Pray the promises and commands of Scripture. This principle is evident in James 1. Does God command that we be wise? Of course He does. It follows then that we should ask for it. "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Similarly, pray the promise of 1 John 1:9, that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Claim the promise of John 3:16 in prayer, that "whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish." Plead that the people of God will be holy even as God is holy (1 Pt 1:16). Plead that they will love one another and bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Faith comes by hearing the word of God doesn't it (Rom 10:17)? The word prayed in the hearing of the congregation will be efficacious to the salvation of their souls.

3. *There is a special comfort in scriptural prayer.*

There is a special comfort in scriptural prayer. It is one thing to pray, "Lord, please be with us through this day." It is quite another to pray, "Lord remember your promise, 'I will never leave nor forsake you'" (Heb 13:5). Can't you sense the difference? It is one thing to pray, "As we begin our prayer, we thank you for the privilege of bringing our petitions to you." It is quite another to pray, "We come at Your invitation, O Christ, for you have promised, 'Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.' And so we come asking, seeking, and knocking" (Matt 7:7,8). It is one thing to pray in the midst of tragedy, "Lord we know that you have a plan." That is a true, valid, and comforting thing to pray. Even so, it is quite another to pray, "O Lord, you have numbered the hairs upon our heads. You are working all things after the counsel of your will. Not even a sparrow may fall from a tree apart from you. You cause all things to work together for good for those who love you, and are called according to your purpose" (Matt 10:29,30; Eph 1:11; Rom 8:28). More effectively comfort the hearts of your people by echoing the promises of Scripture in your prayers.

4. *Scriptural prayer reinforces the ministry of the word.*

As noted above, one reason why previous generations of evangelicals were more Biblically literate than ours is that there was more Bible content in their services than in ours. The word preached and the word prayed and the word sung were constantly reinforcing each other. The romanticism of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emptied our hymns of most of their biblical and theological content. As noted above, only fragments of scriptural expression remain in our songs. We've already commented on the state of preaching and praying. The irony that the churches that profess to believe in the inerrancy of Scripture make such little use of Scripture and are becoming increasingly ignorant of Scripture is bitter indeed. What a difference it will make if you will call the people to worship with Scripture, invoke the presence of God with scriptural praise, sing a metrical Psalm, confess sins using Scripture language, read the Scripture, preach an expository sermon, sing a scriptural hymn, build your intercessions around the five categories found in Scripture, used by the early church, and revived by the Reformers, and conclude with a scriptural benediction.[7] This done, Sunday morning and evening, fifty-two weeks a year, year after year will build a strong church, one characterized by scriptural literacy and spiritual maturity. If you worship in this way your growth may be slower than is acceptable to many. It may require that one take a longer view than is customary today. One may not gather large crowds overnight. But in the long run a church that builds a foundation like this on the words of Christ, will endure like a rock, and not be shaken.

Now we will look at how to become proficient in praying in the language of Scripture.

a. *Study and use the prayers in Scripture.* Are there any better prayers of praise than those of David in 1 Chronicles 29 or the composite prayer of Paul in 1 Timothy? Listen to them:

Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Thine is the dominion, O Lord, and Thou dost exalt Thyself

as head over all. Both riches and honor come from Thee, and Thou dost rule over all, and in Thy hand is power and might; and it lies in Thy hand to make great, and to strengthen everyone. Now, therefore, our God, we thank Thee, and praise Thy glorious name. (1 Chronicles 29:11-13)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. . . . He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15,16)

Are there any better prayers of confession than David's Psalm 51, or Daniel's in Daniel 9? Are there any better prayers of illumination than those of Psalm 43:3 and Eph 3:18,19?

O send out Thy light and Thy truth, let them lead me; let them bring me to Thy holy hill, and to Thy dwelling places. (Psalm 43:3)

May (we) be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that (we) may be filled up to all the fulness of God. (Ephesians 3:18, 19)

Are there any better prayers of intercession for the saints than Paul's for the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians (Eph 1:15-23; Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-11)? The following is a partial list of the major prayers found in Scripture whose study will pay spiritual dividends:

Abraham - Genesis 18:23-33 (intercession)
Moses - Exodus 15:1-18 (praise); 32:11-14 and 33:12-17 (intercession); Numbers 11:10-15 (complaint); 14:11-19 (pleading)
Hannah - 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (praise)
David - II Samuel 7:18-29 (thanksgiving); I Chronicles 29:11-20 (praise)
Solomon - I Kings 3:6-9 (for wisdom); 8:22-53; 54-61 (praise); II Chronicles 6:14-42 (praise and petition)
Hezekiah - II Kings 19:14-19 (intercession)
Jeremiah - Jeremiah 32:16-25 (praise and questioning)
Ezra - Ezra 9:5-15 (confession)
Nehemiah - Nehemiah 9:5-27 (praise and petition)
Daniel - Daniel 9:1-19 (confession and petition)
Habakkuk - Habakkuk 1:12-17 (questioning)
Mary - Luke 1:46-55 (praise)
Zacharias - Luke 1:68-79 (praise)
Simeon - Luke 2:29-32 (praise)
Early Church - Acts 4:24-30 (praise and petition)
Paul - Colossians 1:9-12; Ephesians 1:1-23; Philippians 1:9-11 (praise and petition)
Church Triumphant - Revelation 4:8-5:14 (praise)

b. *Incorporate the language of Scripture in your prayers.* Not only pray the prayers of Scripture, but let both your terminology and content reflect Scripture's terminology and content. Don't just open the worship by praying whatever pops into your head. Pray, "O Lord we have come to worship and bow down, to kneel before You the Lord our Maker; for You are our God, and we are the people of Your pasture, the sheep of Your hand" (Ps 95). Don't just pray, "Lord save our covenant children." Pray instead, "Lord remember your promise to be a God to us and to our children, and so save our covenant children." Pray back to God His promises. Pray back to God His revelation of His own nature. Pray back to God those things that He requires of us in His word. For example, why not turn Ephesians 5:1-17 into a prayer:

We pray that we might be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, just as Christ also loved us. We pray that immorality, and impurity, and greed might not be named among us; nor filthiness and silly talk, nor coarse jesting, nor anything else that is improper or not fitting. Help us to walk as children of light, in goodness, righteousness, and truth. Teach us what is pleasing to you. Use us to expose the unfruitful deeds of darkness. Guide us, that we might walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of our time, because the days are evil. Keep us from foolishness, and give us an understanding of your will. (Ephesians 5:1-17)

Find key phrases and precious promises and turn them into prayer. There is almost no limit to what can be done. Even historical allusions can be profitably employed in prayer. Samuel Miller provides several examples:

In a time of struggle for the church:

O Thou who didst of old, deliver thy covenant people from the bondage of Egypt, and didst open a way through the sea for them to pass in safety; so may it please thee now to deliver thy afflicted and struggling Church, to disappoint those who seek her hurt, to sanctify to her all her troubles, and bring her out of them all with increasing purity, and peace, and joy.[8]

To cry for freedom from the corruption of sin:

We are by nature carnal, sold under sin; but we rejoice to know that, as thou didst once bring thy people out of bondage, and make them the Lord's freemen in their own land; so thou hast promised, by the Lord Jesus Christ, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are the bond slaves of Satan. We rejoice to read in thy word, that, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so the Son of man has been lifted up, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but obtain eternal life.[9]

Especially helpful in the study of prayer in addition to the older volumes already cited are Richard L. Pratt's *Pray With Your Eyes Open*,^[10] W. Graham Scroggie's *Paul's Prison Prayers*,^[11] Donald Cogan's *The Prayers of the New Testament*,^[12] and Herbert Lockyer's *All the Prayers of the Bible*.^[13] Better yet, get a copy of Matthew Henry's *A Method for Prayer* and read it over and over again.

PLAN PUBLIC PRAYERS

Second, we recommend for the improvement of *public prayers that they should be planned*. This is obviously necessary if the preceding point is to be realized, if you are to pray the actual terminology of the Bible. But it is necessary for other reasons as well. It is sad to hear the careless language, the imprecision, and the incoherence of many pulpit prayers today. I suspect, though I cannot prove, that many ministers give no thought whatsoever to what they intend to pray beforehand. Willimon complains that "Many of our pastoral prayers are a maze of poorly thought out, confusing cliches, hackneyed expressions, shallow constructions, and formalized, impersonal ramblings."^[14] All of the old commentators are of one mind on the need of planning public prayers. One ought no more pray without preparation than preach. Fairbairn says, "I would earnestly advise a certain measure of special preparation for the devotional work of the sanctuary."^[15] He encourages the use of an outline, and even the practice of writing out one's prayers, not in order to read them, but in order to organize one's thoughts. W.G.T. Shedd says the minister "ought to study *method* in prayer, and observe it. A prayer should have a plan as much as a sermon."^[16] He continues,

In the recoil from the formalism of written and read prayers, Protestants have not paid sufficient attention to an orderly and symmetrical structure in public supplications. Extemporaneous prayer, like extemporaneous preaching, is too often the product of the single instant, instead of devout reflection and premeditation. It might, at first glance, seem that premeditation and supplication are incongruous conceptions; that prayer must be a gush of feeling, without distinct reflection. This is an error. No man, no creature, can pray well without knowing what he is praying for, and whom he is praying to. Everything in prayer, and especially in public prayer, ought to be well considered and well weighed.^[17]

R.L. Dabney writes, "I deem that the minister is as much bound to prepare himself for praying in public as for preaching. The negligence with which many preachers leave their prayers to accident, while they lay out all their strength on their sermons, is most painfully suggestive of unbelief toward God and indifference to the edification of their brethren." He labels the idea that one should trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit in prayer rather than prepare ahead of time "a remnant of fanatical enthusiasm." "To speak for God to men is a sacred and responsible task. To speak for men to God is not less responsible, and is more solemn The young minister should no more venture into the pulpit with an *impromptu* prayer, than with an *impromptu* sermon."^[18] Both Dabney and Miller (like Murphy) encourage the discipline of what they call "devotional composition," "not so much to recite these written prayers in the pulpit," explains Dabney, "as to train his own taste, and to gather a store of devotional language."^[19] Among modern writers Robert Rayburn agrees: "If a minister wishes to be effective in leading the prayers of his congregation he must prepare for his public prayers."^[20] Now, of course, when we argue that one should prepare for prayer and study to lead in public prayer, we are not saying that the prayer should be read aloud from a manuscript. Free prayer, rich Scriptural free prayer, is too valuable a commodity to be lost to the church. It is studied prayer, not read prayer that we are advocating here.

Let us, then, make a few recommendations about the prayers which you plan.

1. Plan so as to offer brief prayers.

Do not try the patience of your people by rambling on and on. Even the nineteenth century writers recommend brevity. Murphy recommends that the main prayer should be five minutes, or no more than eight. Samuel Miller complains of the "excessive length" of some prayers.^[21] Careful planning will help avoid the "verbiage and repetition" about which Shedd complains.^[22] It will also guard against the frequent and mechanical repetition of favorite phrases, titles of God, and any other formula of

words, of which Dabney complains.[23] He writes, "This mechanical phrase is obnoxious to every charge of formalism, monotony and lack of appropriate variety, which we lodge against an unchangeable liturgy, while it has none of its literary merit and dignified and tender associations." [24] Wandering prayers, meandering at length here, there, and everywhere, will also be corrected by planning.

2. Plan so as not to preach.

Dabney warns of the "painful absurdity in our going about formally to instruct God of his doctrinal truth," or our seeming "to preach to God instead of praying to him." [25] Shedd warns of "didactically discoursing in prayer." [26] Murphy calls it "a great abuse of public prayer to use it for preaching to the audience or for rebuking them, or even, as is often done, for giving information to the Lord." [27] You've all heard ministers pray, "Lord, we thank you for the prayer meeting which is held in the chapel on Wednesday evening at seven o'clock, just after the fellowship supper and just before choir rehearsal. And we know that you want all your people to come unless providentially hindered. Help us to make it a priority." This is "a great abuse of public prayer" (not to mention silly), and must be avoided.

3. Plan so as to use appropriate terminology.

Choose suitable language in addressing the almighty. The old authors denounce, with surprising vehemence, the use of over-familiar language in prayer. "Familiarity is the worst of faults in prayer," says Shedd. [28] Dabney heaps scorn on "Half-educated or spiritually proud men" who "frequently indulge in an indecent familiarity with the Most High, under the pretense of filial nearness and importunity." [29] Spurgeon counsels that one avoid "an unhallowed and sickening superabundance of endearing words." He says, "When 'Dear Lord,' and 'Blessed Lord,' and 'Sweet Lord,' come over and over again as vain repetitions, they are among the worst of blots." He wishes that "in some way or other," those who indulge such "fond and familiar expressions," could come "to a better understanding of the true relation existing between man and God." [30] He counsels that one be "scrupulously reverent" in one's language. [31]

APPLICATION

It remains for us now to illustrate the way in which such prayers are actually prayed, and apply the above principles to the five major prayers of the worship service. As you *invoke* the presence of God, fill your praise with the language of Scripture. Your congregation needs to hear you humbly exalting the greatness and majesty of God. Remember that they are likely to learn how to pray in large part from listening to their minister. Study the great prayers of praise and glean from the Psalms their rich devotional expressions. Week by week provide for them a vision of the power and glory and goodness of the God whom they worship, a God for whom nothing is impossible, a God who can do all things, and God to whom homage and adoration is due.

As you move on to the *prayer of confession*, use the deep, prolonged, detailed language of Scripture. Your people come to church each week bruised and battered by sin. They come burdened with guilt, knowing something of what they ought to be and their failure. Let them hear you humbly grieving for sin on their behalf as you confess idolatry, greed, covetousness, pride, lust, selfishness, jealousy, envy and gossip. Confess that you've not loved God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and not loved your neighbor as yourself. Use, for example, the language of David and confess,

I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight. I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.

And then begin to plead with David,

Be gracious to us, O God, according to your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of your compassion blot out our transgressions. Wash us thoroughly from our iniquity, and cleanse us from our sin. Purify us with hyssop, and we shall be clean; wash us and we shall be whiter than snow. Hide your face from our sins, and blot out all our iniquities. Deliver us from blood guiltiness, O God, the God of our salvation. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and sustain us with a willing spirit. O Lord, open our lips, that our mouth may declare your praise (Ps 51).

Your people are struggling to believe the gospel and struggling to experience forgiveness. They may have confessed their sin privately, and yet they have not found relief. Often the problem is that they have not gone deeply enough. Their brokenness has been healed superficially with flippant promises that "All is well, all is well"; but there is no peace" (Jer 8:11). They need to hear you earnestly acknowledging and grieving sin and claiming the promises of God on their behalf. There was a time I hated using the Thomas Cranmer's Prayer Book. Eventually I learned to love it, and even to look forward to going to chapel each day in no small part so that I could pray Cranmer's beautiful general confession. I found it "therapeutic," though I hesitate to use the word, to deal with God with my sins in corporate worship each day. This is what people need to do in our worship. They need to deal with God. You need to lead them there with praise and then confession. Let them hear you conclude your

confession with a rehearsal of the promises of God. Give thanks for the promise of 1 John 1:9, that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Give thanks that Jesus "bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Pt 2:24), that "He gave His life a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28), that though He knew no sin He became sin "that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). Give thanks that we now have "no condemnation" and "peace with God" in Christ (Rom 8:1, 5:1). Even pray for them the extended promises of Ps 103:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Ps 103:8, 10-12).

As you move into intercessions, plead for the sanctification of your people, let them hear compassion and urgency in your voice as you pray that the ideals of the Christian life might be realized in their lives. They need to hear you praying week after week that they might be holy even as God is holy (1 Pt 1:15,16), that they might be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love (Eph 5:1ff), and conformed to the image of Christ, bearing the fruit of Spirit (Gal 5:22,23). Let them hear you pleading that they'll not love the world nor the things of the world, and that they'll not be seduced by the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life (1 Jn 2:15, 16).

Move on then into four other areas of intercession (mentioned above) found in Scripture, used by the early church, and revived by the Reformers. Pray for the 1) civil authorities; 2) the Christian ministry (Mt 9:36-38) (1 Tim 2:1,2); 3) the salvation of all men (1 Tim 2:1,3-4); and 4) the afflicted (2 Cor 1:3,4,11; Jas 5:13-18).[32] They need to hear the breadth of your prayers. They need to hear your prayers circle the globe as you pray for the progress of Christian missions, for ministers and missionaries, for the nation, and for the needy.

What about the prayer of illumination? Doesn't the congregation need to be reminded that "the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:14)? Won't your people benefit from a weekly reminder that we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit if we are ever to understand the word of God? Pray for illumination before you read Scripture or before you preach. Pray that eyes will be opened, (Ps 119:18) that ears will be unstopped, that stony hearts will be replaced with hearts of flesh, that stiff-necks will be loosened. Pray that the eyes of the heart might be enlightened (Eph 3:18), that the Lord might teach us His truth (Ps 86:11,12), and give us understanding (Ps 119:33).

Finally, they need to hear you pray the blessing of God upon them. Bless them with the Apostolic benediction (2 Cor 13:14) or the Aaronic (Num 6:24-26) or some other (e.g. Heb 13:20-21). Let them leave with one of these scriptural blessings ringing in their ears. Will that not encourage them as they leave? Does this not conclude the service on the gospel's optimistic note?

Can you see now why we have said that the minister needs to lead in prayer? Who in the congregation is trained to pray in this manner? Who is most aware of the pastoral needs of the congregation? Who has been set apart for three years of biblical and theological education? Who spends extended time each day in the study of Scripture? Who labors daily on his knees in private prayer for the souls of the saints? Who consequently is capable of praying in the rich devotional language of Scripture as well as in a manner that is theologically sound? Public prayer is not merely a matter of you or anyone else standing up and praying off the top of your heads. The first thing into most of our minds, as Spurgeon once said, is "mere froth." Even as it makes sense to have the minister preach and administer the sacraments, it makes sense to have him pray. The prayers that we envision are those offered by a man called by God, who saturates his mind with the word of God, and spends hours each week on his knees before God. Even as the church has deemed it wise to apply the New Testament admonitions to "guard the gospel" by entrusting its proclamation through word and sacrament only to those ordained to do so, so also it is both pastorally and theologically wise to leave leadership in prayer in the hands of the minister.

Have you been giving to public prayer the attention it deserves? Do you see how public prayer is a means of grace that builds the church? Begin now to practice "studied prayer," as the Puritans called it, or to employ Watts' term, "conceived prayer." Plan your prayers, fill them with scriptural language and allusions, and watch the sanctifying impact that they make upon the congregation multiply to the glory of God.

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1 Matthew Henry, *A Method for Prayer*, edited by J. Ligon Duncan III (Reformed Academic Press), xiv.

2 Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology* (1875; repr. Old Paths, 1992), 317.

3 Robert Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (1870; repr. Banner of Truth, 1979), 358

4 Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, (1849; repr. Sprinkle, 1985), 217.

5 Thomas Murphy, *Pastoral Theology* (1877; repr. Old Paths, 1996), 213.

6 John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (rev. ed. 1870; repr. Broadman 1944), 368-69.

7 See Terry Johnson, *Leading in Worship* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 1996), 10 n. 15, 34 n. 4, and 52-54.

- 8 Miller, *Public Prayer*, 277.
- 9 Ibid., 277-8.
- 10 (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1987).
- 11(1921, rpt.; Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981).
- 12 (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967).
- 13 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959). Thankfully while books treating public prayers have neglected the use of Scripture-language, the books on private prayer have not. Pratt's is especially good in this respect.
- 14 Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Westminster, 1984), 44.
- 15 Murphy, *Pastoral Theology*, 318.
- 16 W. G. T. Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* (1867; repr. Banner of Truth 1965), 271.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 346-7, 360.
- 19 Ibid., 360; see also Miller, *Public Prayer*, 288ff.
- 20 Robert Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship* (Baker, 1980), 199.
- 21 Miller, *Public Prayer*, 187.
- 22 Shedd, *Homiletics*, 272-3.
- 23 Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 347-8.
- 24 Ibid., 348.
- 25 Ibid., 355.
- 26 Shedd, *Homiletics*, 273.
- 27 Murphy, *Pastoral Theology*, 211-212.
- 28 Shedd, *Homiletics*, 273.
- 29 Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 349.
- 30 Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 57.
- 31 Ibid., 58.
- 32 Terry Johnson, *Leading in Worship* (Covenant Foundation, 1996), 10, n. 15; 34, n. 4;52-54.

* This article has been excerpted from chapter 7, "Reading and Praying the Bible in Corporate Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003).

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Corporate Aspects of the Lord's Prayer* *By Philip Graham Ryken*

Jesus often took a small group of disciples with him when he went off to pray. Before he was transfigured, "he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28). He took his disciples to watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-38). To this very day, Jesus calls his disciples to come away in small groups to pray, for wherever two or three come together in his name, he is right there with them (Matt. 18:20).

Since Jesus has commanded us to pray together, we should pray in our homes. Roommates should pray together—daily if possible, but at least weekly. Parents should pray with their children at mealtimes, at bedtime, and throughout the day. Husbands and wives should pray together about the needs of their household.

Christians should also pray together in small groups. Home Bible studies and fellowship groups are sometimes considered a recent development in the life of the church. Yet wise Christians have never been satisfied to worship only once a week. They have always gathered during the week for prayer. The first apostles went to the temple to pray. The apostle Paul held house meetings in all the churches he planted. Even under persecution, Christians met in places like the catacombs to pray. Societies of men and women were organized for prayer throughout the Middle Ages. During the Reformation, pastors met together for Bible teaching and prayer. Many of the Puritans formed house groups. In short, Christians have always met regularly to pray with their brothers and sisters. If prayer meetings were good for people like Peter, Lydia, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), they will be good for you, too. One of the things that makes the church a community is the fact that believers pray together.

Since the Lord's Prayer is a family prayer, we not only pray *with* one another, we also pray *for* one another. In the last three petitions we do not pray for ourselves, primarily, but for the whole church.

OUR DAILY BREAD

When we say, "Give us today our daily bread," we are praying for *our daily provision*. We are asking God to meet the material needs of our brothers and sisters. This is why church bulletins often mention who is in the hospital, or what a missionary needs, or which family needs help moving. It is also why small groups spend time sharing personal prayer requests. When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to pray for the needs of the family.

Praying for a brother or a sister is one sign of spiritual maturity. Imagine a very demanding little boy. Every day he asks his parents to feed him breakfast, to find his shirt, to tie his shoes, to take him to the park, to give him a snack, and to do a hundred other things for him. Then one day the boy makes a request, not for himself, but for his little sister. He says, "Dad, can you help my sister? She climbed up on the dresser and she can't get down." The boy's father will be touched by his son's concern for another family member. In the same way, our Father in heaven wants us to ask for daily provision for our brothers and sisters.

OUR DAILY PARDON

We are also to pray for *our daily pardon*, which is what we do when we say, "Forgive us our debts." Some sins are private sins. They are committed by an individual within the privacy of the heart. While every Christian needs to confess his or her own personal sin, other sins are corporate sins. They are committed by nations, cities, churches, or families. They are no one's fault in particular, but they are everyone's fault in general. God thus holds us responsible, not only for our individual sins, but also for the sins of our group. That is why so many of the great heroes of the Old Testament—Daniel, for example (Dan. 9:4-19), and Ezra (Ezra 9:5-15)—confessed the sins of the entire nation.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we confess not only our individual sins, but especially the corporate sins of the church. What are the prevailing sins of your church? Pride? Envy? Hypocrisy? Prejudice? Greed? These are the kinds of sins which require corporate repentance. As a general rule, the Holy Spirit does not come in his reviving power until a church confesses its sins *as a church*.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Finally, when we say, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," we pray for our daily protection. As a pastor, I often offer this kind of prayer on behalf of our congregation: "Some of us will be tempted to sin today, Lord. Keep us from falling! Provide a way of escape! Save us from sin and from Satan!"

Daily provision, daily pardon, daily protection—these are the things we ask for in our family prayer. By praying these things for one another, we strengthen our family ties. As Cyprian once explained:

Before all things, the Teacher of peace and the Master of unity would not have prayer to be made singly and individually, as for one who prays to pray for himself alone. For we say not "My Father, which art in heaven," nor "Give me this day my daily bread;" nor does each one ask that only his own debt should be forgiven him; nor does he request for himself alone that he may not be led into temptation, and delivered from evil. Our prayer is public and common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, because we the whole people are one.

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*This article has been excerpted from *When You Pray: Making the Lord's Prayer Your Own* (2000; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), pp. 43-45.



Thirty Two Principles for Public Prayer

By J. Ligon Duncan III (following Samuel Miller)

Those who regularly bear the solemn responsibility of leading the congregation in public prayer are here again encouraged to study and reflect on this important matter. The consistent devotional use of such helps as Matthew Henry's *Method for Prayer* should be a helpful aid in preparing for such an awesome privilege and duty. In the introduction Samuel Miller's *Thoughts on Public Prayer* has already been commended, but perhaps an enumeration of some of Miller's main principles and admonitions will whet the reader's appetite for more and prove useful in evaluating our own efforts in corporate prayer.

Miller detected the following common faults in the public praying of the church in his day and they remain applicable to our own.

FREQUENT FAULTS IN PUBLIC PRAYER

1. Overuse of certain favorite words and set forms of expression. This can become monotonous if one leads in pastoral prayer week after week. Too much repetition of God's name ("Lord," "Father," "Heavenly Father," etc.) should also be diligently avoided. This is often simply a matter of habit and lack of forethought.
2. Hesitation and apparent embarrassment in articulation. Long, awkward pauses and grasping for words detract from the power of public prayer.
3. Ungrammatical expressions in prayer. Rules of grammar and syntax should be studiously observed lest our poor form of speech become a stumbling block to those congregated for worship.
4. A lack of order and certain important elements of prayer. Disorderliness is a distraction for people who are trying to pray along with the one leading in prayer. During our public worship every Biblical element of prayer (such as adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession) should be employed. If there is only one comprehensive prayer in the service it should exhibit each part of prayer. If the various parts of prayer are divided into multiple prayers then each element should be given due prominence within the service. Corporate prayer which ignores or neglects any one of these elements is essentially defective.
5. Too much detail in particular elements of prayer. We should aim for proportion between the various parts of the prayer.
6. Praying too long. Excessive length in public prayer should be avoided. "Long prayers are for the closet." In Miller's day, when attention spans were much longer than our own, he recommended 12-15 minutes at the most. The reader may judge what is appropriate for his own situation.
7. The employment of allegorical style in prayer. Overuse of highly figurative language is to be discouraged and simplicity of form commended.
8. Introduction of allusions to party politics, and personalities in prayer. These are serious faults in public prayer. On the matter of prayer and politics the wise and learned Dr. Miller, toward the end of his earthly course, said, "I resolved, more than thirty years ago, never to allow myself, either in public prayer or preaching, to utter a syllable, in periods of great political excitement and party strife, that would enable any human being so much as to conjecture to which side in the political conflict I leaned." With regard to alluding to specific personalities in prayer, it may be noted in passing that it is never appropriate to pray "at" someone in public worship.
9. Usage of unsuitably affectionate or intimate language in prayer. The inappropriate use of amatory language (particularly when directed toward the persons of the Trinity) ought to be avoided in public devotions. This language, no matter how well intentioned, often has the appearance of being artificial or quaint.

10. The injection of comedy into prayer. The practice of indulging in wit, humor or sarcasm in public prayer is absolutely inexcusable and should not be tolerated.

11. Use of prayer to expound on a point of teaching. Miller says, "the excellence of a public prayer may be marred by introducing into it a large portion of didactic statement." The purpose of prayer is not to provide an outline of the text, the sermon or some topic in Christian doctrine, but to lead sinners to the throne of grace.

12. Careless over-emphasis of doctrines which are particularly repugnant to unbelievers. Those who are prone to discoursing on doctrine in their praying may also tend to be "studious of introducing, with much point, those doctrines which are most offensive to the carnal heart and which seldom fail to be revolting to our impenitent hearers." While no Scriptural doctrine should be deemed unsuitable for and excluded altogether from public prayer (even difficult and offensive teachings: the atonement, original sin, predestination, etc.) we should not become disproportionate in our emphasis or thoughtless in our language.

13. Casualness or over-familiarity in our speech with the Almighty. The High and Holy One is often addressed with too much familiarity (and sometimes almost flippancy). This is both distracting and disturbing to devout persons and ought to be studiously avoided.

14. Inappropriate display of pastoral "humility." Many ministers, before they preach, are wont to confess their unworthiness to proclaim the gospel and abase themselves before God. Miller warns, "there is such a thing as expressing unseasonably and also as carrying to an extreme the profession of humility." Public avowal of our ministerial humility (even in the form of prayer) carries with it certain spiritual dangers for which we all must be on guard.

15. Flattery in prayer. Anything even approaching flattery in public prayer is a serious matter. As Miller said, "flattery in any man and on any occasion is criminal." Yet, particularly when there are visiting dignitaries present in the congregation or preaching in the pulpit, this is a temptation to which ministers often succumb. We pray to God not to men. The Lord Almighty is our audience. Let us seek our approval of Him.

16. Lack of a sense of occasion. Some prayers so disregard the circumstances of the service, that they are virtually generic and would be as suitable for one occasion as well as another. Public prayer ought to be fitted for and appropriate to the circumstances of the service in which it is rendered.

17. Lack of reverence in the conclusion of prayer. Often the sentences or words of a prayer are spoken in such a way which gives the impression that the one praying is more concerned about what he must do following the prayer than he is with reverently addressing the Almighty. Our conclusions to prayer should be as worshipful as our beginnings.

18. Excessive volume and rapidity in prayer. Sometimes, as an expression of deep and ardent feeling, a person will pray very loudly and/or rapidly. Not only is this distracting in and of itself, but also makes it difficult for the congregation to follow along.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PUBLIC PRAYER

After his discussion of common weaknesses in public prayer, Miller suggests a number of marks of suitable public prayer. The following synopsis is drawn from that discussion.

1. Public prayer should abound in the language of Scripture. This is "one of the most essential excellencies in public prayer," said Miller. The language of the word of God is always right, safe, and edifying. Furthermore, in God's word there is a simplicity and tenderness which is very powerful and particularly suited to captivate the heart. Finally, it enables the listener to follow the prayer more easily.

2. Public prayer should be well-ordered. Regular order is helpful to the memory of the one who is leading in prayer and assists the worshippers who are joining in it. Furthermore, it helps keep the prayer at a proper length. Of course, this does not mean that the same order must be used every time.

3. It should be general and comprehensive. Miller observes that "a suitable prayer in the public assembly is dignified and general in its plan, and comprehensive in its requests, without descending to too much detail." This will better suit the prayer to the general petitions that need to be rendered up by the congregation as a whole.

4. It should not be too wordy or lengthy. This will involve care not to attempt to pray on too many topics, or in too great detail.

5. It should be appropriate to the occasion on which it is offered. This is a Scriptural pattern, a help to the worshippers, and a good way to keep pastoral prayers from becoming too tedious or lengthy.
6. It ought to contain a good dose of gospel truth. Without turning into a sermon, Miller suggests that "It is an important excellence in a public prayer that it include the recognition of so much gospel truth as to be richly instructive to all who join in it, as well as who listen to it."
7. It should manifest variety. There is so much that is suitable for inclusion in the petitions of corporate prayer in the Lord's church, that only laziness can lead us to pray over the same content, in the same pattern, week after week. A desirable degree of variety in prayer can be a great help to holding the attention of those worshippers who are seriously attempting to join in offering prayer to God.
8. If prayer is routinely closed with a doxology from Scripture, the doxology should be varied. This practice was standard in Miller's day and is to be commended to the Christian public in our own.
9. It should contain petition for the advance of the gospel. Miller says "a good public prayer ought always to include a strongly marked reference to the spread of the gospel, and earnest petitions for the success of the means employed by the Church for that purpose."
10. The names of the Lord should be appropriately employed in the various parts of prayer. Instead of simply employing one title of God throughout a prayer it is appropriate to change this title from one segment of prayer to another.
11. It should be marked by the spirit and language of hope and confidence. "Our gracious covenant God loves to be taken at his word; to be firmly and affectionately trusted; to have his exceeding great and precious promises importunately pleaded; and to be approached as a willing, tender Father, not only 'mighty to save,' but ready and willing to save; more ready to bestow the gifts of his grace than earthly parents to give good things to their children" said Miller.
12. The prayer after the sermon should be solemn and impressive. Miller suggests that "it ought to be formed upon the plan of taking hold of the conscience and the heart most deeply and effectually."
13. The frequent use of the Lord's prayer is proper, but not mandatory. We should not feel constrained to use the Lord's Prayer every Sunday.
14. The voice and tone in which we offer prayer should be suitable to the solemn activity. "It is important to add, that the whole manner of uttering a public prayer should be in accordance with the humble, filial, affectionate, yet reverential spirit which ought to characterize the prayer itself throughout," said Miller. For a sinner to offer a prayer to Almighty God in a "pompous, dictatorial manner" is incongruous with our status as sinful men and the very activity of prayer (which is an acknowledgment of our creaturely dependence and an exercise of humble reliance).

In conclusion, we may note Miller's pithy description of an acceptable public prayer. He said "Words 'few,' 'well considered,' and 'well ordered,' are the inspired characteristics of a good prayer."

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Sample Corporate Prayers from December 2, 2007

By various individuals

Editor's note: Here are lightly edited transcriptions of the prayers of praise, confession, intercession, and thanksgiving from Capitol Hill Baptist Church one Sunday morning.

PRAYER OF PRAISE

Father, we praise you that you are a God who makes wonderful promises. We praise you that you promise life, peace and joy; you promise a world ruled by a perfect ruler who loves and cares for his subjects.

Father, we praise you that you are faithful to all your promises. We praise you that you have the power to ensure that not a word of your promises ever falls to the ground. We praise you that even when men seek in their evil to obstruct your plans you use their evil to bring your plans to fulfillment. We praise you that we can have complete confidence in all your promises, including the promise that one day we will see the Lord Jesus Christ face to face in glory. Father, we praise you that you make your promises to those who do not deserve them.

We praise you that, though we have rejected your authority and refused to give thanks for your provision, you have promised your people an eternity under your perfect rule and a world full of abundance, a banquet of the best of meats and the finest of wines.

We praise you that you have done what was necessary for these promises to come to fulfillment, that you have sent your Son to seal the covenant of your promises in his own blood, so that we may have confidence that, though our sins are scarlet, you will wash them white as snow.

Father, we praise you that when we have received every blessing that you have promised, we will not rejoice so much in the glory of the world around us but in the face and presence of our beloved Saviour, Jesus Christ. We praise you that every blessing we receive from your hand is the overflow of the glories of your character. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Father, we come before you as our maker and our judge, conscious of our rebellion against you; conscious that, though you are our provider and our sustainer, we reject you.

Father, we confess that, though you are the most glorious, beautiful, awesome thing in the universe, our hearts are cold to you and we consider knowledge of you cheap.

Father, we confess that we do not do your will.

We confess that throughout our lives we reject what you have said to be good and embrace that which is evil.

Father, as we consider that Jesus Christ was obedient unto death, we confess that at the smallest inconvenience or hardship or denial of pleasure involved in obedience we quickly turn away from doing what pleases you. Sometimes even the effort of trying to understand whether or not something is your will is too much trouble for us.

We confess that, if disobedience makes the slightest offer of pleasure or comfort, we too often take it, ignoring the promises of life that you have made to those who follow you. Please forgive us and change us that we might have hearts responsive to your word.

Father, we confess that one of the ways we disobey you is in our lack of service toward others. We know that so often we refuse to relinquish our interests for the sake of others. Though we know that Christ was prepared to go to the cross in the service of us who deserved nothing of the kind, we are so often slow to lay aside our needs for the sake of others. We make excuses and rationalize why our needs should come first, forgetting that the Lord Jesus Christ has called us to follow him as a servant.

Father, as we consider our sin, we are sorry for how little we pray to you that sin might not reign in our hearts, how little we cry out to you for strength to resist sin in our lives. We pray that you would give us a greater concern for obedience so that we would pray daily for your strength to resist evil.

We bring our hearts before you Lord, full of evil and selfishness; and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by his blood shed for our sake we ask that you would hear our prayer, have mercy upon us, forgive us, cleanse us and change us. For your name's sake, amen.

Hear the Word of God: "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death."

PASTORAL PRAYER (OF INTERCESSION)

Lord God, we thank you that you have desired to glorify yourself and that you have desired to love us as part of that. Thank you for calling us in your Word to cast all our cares on you. You have proven yourself faithful again and again; and so we make these needs known publicly, because we know that you are faithful and we desire to bring glory to you.

Lord, we pray for members of this congregation that are in special need. You know what these needs are: physical needs, needs in our family or at work, spiritual needs. Oh God, we pray that you would by your grace reveal our neediness to us and reveal to us your fullness and your faithfulness.

Lord, we pray especially you for all the young parents in this congregation. We thank you for them, we thank for giving them this exciting calling. We pray that you would give them strength, give them wisdom, give them encouragement.

We pray, too, Lord for all those brothers and sisters from other nations that you have entrusted to our care. Thank you, Lord, for the little taste of the international nature of your body that you have given us here. We thank you especially for those brothers and sisters that make an extra effort to speak to us in English, to fellowship with us even when it is sometimes exhausting for them. Lord, thank you for strengthening them. We pray that you would encourage them.

Lord, you tell us that we are to pray for those in authority, and so we do. We pray for state legislators in our land. Cause them to use their authority wisely, especially when it touches on the care of children and those matters that are taught in public schools. We pray that you would give them an understanding of how you have made us and what things are good for people. We pray for the protection of religious freedom in public schools. We thank you for the amount of liberty that we've had in this land for so long to speak about you, and we pray that that would continue. For our own officials here in the District, we do pray for honesty in their work. In your kindness to people in this District, we pray that you would root out corruption in this government. We pray that funds that are taken from honest taxpayers would be used wisely and well. And Lord, we do pray for the president; we pray for him personally; we pray for his relationship with his wife, through all the trials and difficulties of having that job.

Lord, we pray for our own congregation and our ministry here of evangelism. We thank you for all the opportunities that are afforded to us at this time of year. We do pray for the Christmas Eve service; we pray that men and women would come that don't normally come within the sound of your gospel and that they would hear the Good News of Jesus and be converted. We pray for the Carols on the Hill service: for those making music, for those leading the congregation, for our brother Matt as he speaks. Bless that time and use it for your glory. We pray for the Christmas tea. Thank you for the many ladies that have been involved in that, and we pray your blessings of Marlene as she speaks. We pray for fruit from that. We pray for the Angel Tree ministry. Thank you for the many relationships that have been built. We pray, Lord, that we would be faithful with the wealth that you have entrusted to us. We pray that we would be able to show your kindness and care, even in small and simple ways to those around us. Oh Lord, you have loved us so much, and we pray that you would enlarge our hearts with love for those around us.

Lord, we pray for our dear brother C. J. Mahaney and the Sovereign Grace ministries. We thank you for the many ways in which that movement has been a blessing to this congregation. We do pray for C. J. today: we pray that you would uphold him with your power, that you would fill him with your Spirit and enable him to both speak and hear your Word well, and that you would bless those churches.

Lord, we pray for our own Josh and Jenny ----- . We thank you for them. We thank you for entrusting them to us. We thank you for giving them now a child. Thank you for causing them to be a family that knows and trusts you. And we pray for Josh especially, Lord, as he pursues studies in seminary. We pray that he would think carefully about you and your Word and that you would cause him to be a blessing to many others as he comes to know and love you more.

We pray for our dear brother Michael ----- in El Salvador today. We pray for Rodrigo ----- there with him that he would be encouraged by Michael's presence. We pray that Michael would be able to instruct pastors and that they would hear and learn. Lord, we pray that you would defeat plans of the Evil One because Michael is there and has reflected on the Word and teaches faithfully. We pray for Adrienne and the children as they are here without Michael. We pray that you would encourage them and provide for them. Show Adrienne your faithfulness each day, we pray.

We pray for your church around the world. We pray, Lord, for the tiny churches in Azerbaijan. We pray for the growth of your gospel in that land. Thank you for the religious freedom that the fall of the Soviet Union government has meant in so many places, including in Azerbaijan. Thank you for how much more freedom there is in Latvia and we pray that your gospel would spread in that land. We thank you again for the spread of your gospel in Uganda. It's been amazing to see what you've done there in the last century. And, oh God, even now as there's an Ebola outbreak and some are choosing to stay and minister, we pray that you would use this time to make your gospel clear. And, Father, we pray for mercy on those people. We pray that you would help the officials to administer resources and movements of people well.

Lord, we thank you for the great heritage of the translations of your Word we have in English. Thank you that we are able to read your Word as easily and readily as we are. We give you praise for the way that you have poured out this grace and favour on our land and so many more.

We pray for the nation of Yemen—oh, Lord—addicted to drug production and use as it is—broken in so many ways. Oh, God, bring your gospel to that needy land. We pray that you would break the grip of the Evil One there, and we pray that many men and women would come to know you.

Oh God, we pray for the president of Sudan. We pray Lord that you would give him a conviction of sin; awaken his conscience. Make way there, we pray, for more free preaching of your word and for a just government.

We pray for President Karzai of Afghanistan—that you would give him wisdom in the very difficult task that he has. And we pray that your gospel would continue to take root and spread in that land.

Lord, here in our own nation, we do pray that Christians would grow in grace and humility. We pray that we would well reflect the Lord Jesus Christ to those around us.

Here in our own congregation, we pray that we would be marked by gratitude for what you have done and by confidence in what you will do. Oh Lord, feed us by your word we pray, in Jesus name, amen.

PRAYER OF THANKS

Dear Lord, we come before you now to give you thanks for all that you have given to us, not least of which is your grace that we know through your Son Jesus Christ. We give now out of an overflow of your kindness towards us and we pray that through them your Word would spread and bring you glory. We pray these things in Christ's name and for his glory, amen.

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Sample Corporate Prayers from December 9, 2007

By various individuals

Editor's note: Here are lightly edited transcriptions of the prayers of praise, confession, intercession, and thanksgiving from Capitol Hill Baptist Church one Sunday morning.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Father, we come to you as rebels; as evil men and women who have done wrong in your sight.

Lord God, we confess that, though you have created us and given us every good thing, from the smallest breath to our most precious possession, we have not given you thanks as you deserve.

Though we have been made to worship you, and in your service is joy and liberty, we have put ourselves under the mastery of other things.

We confess that we have made ourselves slaves to our desires—desires for comfort, desires for pleasure, desires for wealth and riches. We have regarded them as better masters than you, and they have borne us bitter fruit. We arrange our lives, not according to your commands as our creator, but according to what will gratify the cravings of our hearts. We are prepared to go to any lengths to serve ourselves. Father, we confess that we will disregard the needs of others and your holy word in order to claim what we want.

Father, we confess our enmity against you. We confess that our hearts too often feel no affection for you. We confess that we see no value in hearing your voice in your Word; we feel no joy in pouring out our hearts to you in prayer. Father, we confess that even the cross of Christ, even that great act of love and grace by the Lord Jesus Christ, inspires little devotion or adoration in our hearts.

Forgive us our ingratitude, Father. Forgive us our idolatry. Forgive us our rebellion and pride. We ask for your mercy and your grace in our helplessness. We ask in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and on grounds of his blood shed in our place. For his name's sake, amen.

Hear the comfort of the Word of God:

Praise the LORD, O my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

Praise the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits-

who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion.

PRAYER OF PRAISE

Heavenly Father, We do ascribe to you the glory due your name, and praise you for the splendor of your holiness. We praise you because in your holiness you are just, patient and wise. In you there is no bias motivated by wickedness or evil. Your vision is not distorted by sin. The vain things of this world do not distract you, and do not complicate your motives.

Unlike us your eyes see the true state of our hearts. With precision your gaze sees the eternal value of all things, for you alone always view life through the lens of truth. So, we praise you, and you only as our worthy and just Judge.

As your people, who so often happily choose blindness instead of sight, and deafness instead of the hearing of your voice, we marvel at your patience; for in the very act of your restraint the depth of your kindness is illuminated and the nature of your mercy displayed.

Every day that you endure the sinfulness of your creation, the shades of your compassion become more clear, and its shape more sweet. And God we praise you because in your just judgment, in your patience, you display perfect wisdom.

Throughout Scripture, Heavenly Father, we see that it is by your will and your word that all life, all creation exists. Lord Jesus, it is by your life, death and resurrection, by your faithful enduring obedience, that the Father redeems those who are his. Holy Spirit, it is by your work that the hearts of men are turned toward the Father and made capable of glorifying him.

So, Lord, our hearts sing your praise this morning, for you are the source of all justice, patience and true wisdom. We praise you because your character, your attributes, turn the attention of all creation to the only one worthy of glory.

It is to the praise of Christ alone that we pray these things, through him, amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER (OF INTERCESSION)

Lord, you are wonderful in your love for us. We give you praise and thanks. Lord, you've heard it in our prayers and in our songs; you've heard it in our conversations and in our hearts. Now, we want to obey your Word and cast our cares on you—ask of you—even more. We do this not because you are in any way lacking in your fullness towards us, but because we would give you glory by making it known publicly what a trustworthy and reliable God you are.

So, Lord, we do pray for members of this congregation that are in special need. You know who they are and what those needs are. We pray that you would show yourself sufficient; and when you do, turn our hearts to give you thanks. Help us to be quick to give you praise and thanks for your goodness and your kindness to us in answering our prayers. We pray for those among us who are sick or who have friends and family who are in the hospital. Show tenderness to them and remind them of the promises that we have in Christ. We pray Lord for health and strength and even more for faith and trust in you.

Lord, we pray for the many unmarried people in the congregation. We pray for those that you are calling to be single that you would give them a joy and contentedness in their calling. And for those that you desire to be married, we pray that you would show them their spouse that they could begin their married lives and families together.

You tell us in your word that we should pray for those in authority over us, Lord, and so we pray for our president. We pray that you would give him wisdom. We thank you for the government in this nation under which we enjoy freedom of religion. We thank you for the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly that are recognised in this land. We thank you that these are recognized as rights from you. We pray for wisdom especially for school administrators during this holiday season as they are trying to be respectful of the law and the faiths of the students. Oh, Lord, give them wisdom we pray. We do pray that during this time of year the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ would be joyfully, regularly, and clearly shared.

Father, we pray, too, for those ministries which are such a blessing to us. We think of CCEF—the Christian Counselling and Educational Foundation. We thank you for their literature and training that so many of us have profited from. Lord, at the end of the year we pray that you'd supply their needs financially. We pray that you'd encourage them—those who labour there to study your Word and their own hearts and write in such a way that's useful for our sanctification. We pray that you'd encourage them even today in their good work.

Lord, we pray for fruit from the Christmas tea here yesterday. We thank you for the many who laboured on that. We thank you especially for Marlene, for preserving her and using her. Lord, we pray that you would plant the seed of faith in many women's hearts through that time and would bring that to full fruition.

We pray for churches around this country, Lord, and for the college students in them, especially as we near the end of the semester. We pray that churches in crucial cities around campuses with students would hold out your gospel clearly, and we pray that there would be conversions from Los Angeles to Chicago to Madison, Wisconsin, to Charlotte to here. Lord, in the hundreds of cities around this land where young people are collected to study, we pray that you would plant vital witnesses for the gospel.

Lord, we thank you for Greg and Diane ----- . We thank you for their fellowship with us this last year. We pray that you would encourage them in their work in Central Asia. We pray that you would supply for their every need.

And as we think of places around the world, we do pray for the nation of Egypt. We pray for living

wages to be paid to factory workers there so that they can provide for their families through honourable work. We pray that you would cause Christians to be active in doing good to others, and we pray that your gospel would be adorned through the good activity of Christians in that land.

We pray, Lord, for the president of Mali. We pray that he would become a proponent of religious freedom in that land.

We thank you for the many churches in Zimbabwe that have already assembled today and sung your praises. We pray, Lord, that you would strengthen them, bless them in their evangelism, bless them in the use of evangelistic films. We thank you for the way you've brought men and women to yourself through that medium, and we pray that you would continue to use it there.

We pray for the many African independent churches across the continent of Africa, we thank you for raising up these witnesses to you. We pray that you would give them mature leaders that know you and know your Word well.

Lord, we thank you for the religious freedom in the little nation of Luxembourg. We thank you for the way that men and women there have been able to hear the gospel preached, and we pray that would continue. We pray for more people who would believe and trust in you and preach your good news.

We pray too, Lord, for the little nation of Bahrain. We pray that your gospel would spread in that land. And we pray, again, as we prayed last week, for Azerbaijan. We pray for its president that he would understand the rightness of allowing men and women to follow their own conscience in their worship of you.

Lord, for Christians in our land, we pray that we would be diligent in spending personal time with you alone. Father, make us disciplined in this way; cause us not be hypocrites—to have a show of a relationship with you when really we only have a passing acquaintance. Oh God, deepen our relationships with you. We pray, too, that you would bless our families, that our families would know the benefits of having Christians in them and the influence that we are for love and generosity and kindness and forgiveness.

Here in our own congregation, we pray that you would mark us as those who are convicted of our sins towards you. Give us tender consciences towards you, we pray. And then Lord show us Jesus. Show us clearly in your Word the sacrifice of Christ. By your spirit, Lord, make it appear to our hearts. Help us to understand and believe and feed on you by faith. O Risen Lord, we thank you for the hope that you lay before us, and we pray that you would increase our faith. We ask that you would do that even today through the preaching of your Word. In Jesus name, amen.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Dear Lord, we come before you now to give you thanks for your grace and mercy to sinners like us. Every day you shower us with blessings we don't deserve, in addition to the supreme gift of your Son Jesus. We give now out of an overflow of your kindness towards us and we pray that through them your Word would spread and bring you glory. We pray these things in Christ's name and for his glory, amen.

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Sample Sunday School Class – On Corporate Prayer

From the Capitol Hill Baptist "Living as a Church" series

Corporate Prayer: God's Power Creates Unity (Class 4)

I. INTRODUCTION

You have walked into a class on prayer this morning. That's probably not too surprising if you've been around churches for long—you've probably had a number of classes on prayer over the years. But let me explain what's going to be different about this class. We're going to be looking at the role that corporate prayer has to play in our life as a church. Not your life individually. Individual prayer is crucial—but that's not the topic of this class. Our prayer *together* as a church is the topic here.

Those of you who have been attending this Sunday School know that the goal of our time together is to understand what we can do as church members to foster the love and unity in our local church that uniquely and compellingly demonstrates the power of the gospel. Think of Jesus' words in John 13:35: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Given how central prayer is to our lives as Christians, it makes sense that prayer is a vital part of building unity in our church.

Why Prayer Is Important

Generally speaking, why is prayer so important? Prayer is how God's people respond to him in thankfulness and praise. Prayer is how God's people cry out to him for mercy and deliverance. Prayer is how God's people call upon him to accomplish the work of his kingdom. In short, prayer is how we actively demonstrate our utter dependence on him. It honors him as the source of all blessing.

God calls his saints to be active in the work of the kingdom, whether through preaching, evangelism, and so forth (1 Cor. 3:9). But as we lean on him through prayer, we are reminded that the salvation of individuals and the growth in his churches ultimately comes from him, not from us. When his kingdom is advanced through prayer, he gets the glory because it's eminently clear that he's behind it all. (Indeed, it reminds us that even our activities of preaching, evangelizing, and praying are the result of his work.)

A Few Biblical Examples of Prayer

As early as Genesis chapter 4, "men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (v.26). They realized their dreadful separation from God through their sin after the fall.

In Elijah's great contest with the prophets of Baal, he called upon the name of the Lord, and the prophets called on the name of Baal (1 Kings 18). Elijah prayed:

Oh Lord, God of Abraham, Issac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all of these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again. (1 Kings 18:36-37).

The Lord answered Elijah by bringing down fire upon the offering. So God was glorified because it was evidently clear that he was the one true God, not Baal.

In Psalm 50:15 God says: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

In the New Testament, God's people are still commanded to call out to God, but Christ taught that we should pray to the Father in his name. In John 14:13, Jesus says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."

These examples illustrate how God uses prayer to make it very clear that he is the one who blesses. Therefore he gets the glory.

Raising the Question

But I wonder if you've considered just how important it is to pray together with other Christians. In today's individualistic culture, not much emphasis is placed on corporate prayer. But as we'll see, the Bible attaches great significance to God's people coming together to pray.

For the rest of our time together, we'll begin by thinking about why God has called us to pray together as a church. We'll then consider how corporate prayer contributes to unity, and how we, as members of this church, can contribute to this unity by actively involving ourselves in the prayer life of the church.

My hope is that through the material we cover, we will have a better understanding of the importance of corporate prayer, and that we will be thinking in a more focused way about seeking opportunities to pray with other members of the church.

II. WHY IS CORPORATE PRAYER IMPORTANT?

Let's begin by considering the importance of Christians praying together in the church. I would hazard a guess that the first thing that comes into most of our minds when someone mentions prayer is our own personal prayer times with the Lord rather than corporate prayer. Private prayer is certainly very important. We know this from Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew where he says:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:6).

Clearly, Christians are commanded to pray privately, even secretly.

But the Bible also very clearly calls upon Christians to pray together. Indeed, in Matthew 6, verse 9, just three verses after the verse I just read to you, Jesus instructs his disciples on how to pray by setting forth what we know as the Lord's Prayer.

Beginning in verse 9, Jesus says,

This then is how you should pray: **Our** Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give **us** today our daily bread. Forgive **us** our debts, as **we** also forgive **our** debtors. And lead **us** not into temptation, but deliver **us** from the evil one.

Did you notice all the plurals—"our," "us," "we"? In providing a model prayer for his disciples, Jesus puts it in a form that commends it for corporate use. The prayer naturally lends itself to group prayer because of its using "our" instead of "my." Even praying the Lord's prayer privately—which is fine to do—will remind you that you are praying as part of a family of other believers. The Lord's Prayer is an invitation not only to pray but to pray together with other believers.

So why is corporate prayer—praying together with other believers—so important?

1. It Advances God's Kingdom in Face of Opposition

First, corporate prayer is important because God uses prayer together to advance his kingdom in the face of opposition.

The early church had a number of obstacles to overcome, including persecution. In spite of persecution, it continued to expand. How?

If you have your Bibles, turn to Acts chapter 2 where we learn that the early church gathered regularly for prayer. In verses 42 to 44, Luke writes,

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

As a result—verse 47—"the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Yet this growth often occurred in the face of persecution, which we see several times. In Acts 4, Peter and John are released from prison and the church gathers to hear their report. Then they prayed together, praising God for his sovereignty and asking for boldness in the face of the threats. Luke then tells us:

After they had 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)

The result was that the gospel spread even more.

Another example occurs in Acts 12. When King Herod (Agrippa I) arrests Peter in order to please the Jews, the church gathers together and "was earnestly praying to God for him" (Acts 12:5). The night before Herod was to put Peter on trial, Peter was miraculously delivered from imprisonment (Acts 12:5-11).

So we see the power of united prayer in the early church. That power comes from the Holy Spirit, who seemed to be especially active in their corporate prayer. But the Holy Spirit didn't stop working with the early church. Throughout history we've seen God's work to be particularly active when his people have faithfully prayed together.

The power of the Spirit in the early church and throughout history should embolden us to pray together regularly for the expansion of the gospel in our country and around the world. God's work will not be thwarted! And following the example of the early church, we're to call upon him to continue in that work. That's why our church consistently prays for the work of other churches both in the morning and evening services. That's why our church prays for religious freedom in countries where Christians are being persecuted. But it's also why our church desires to see the church expand in the very face of persecution—that God's power and wisdom will be displayed as his church expands—inexplicably (by human wisdom)!—when all the forces of hell are arrayed against it.

2. It Imparts Wisdom and Guidance

Second, God imparts wisdom and guidance to churches as his people gather together in prayer seeking such wisdom.

Corporate prayer was important for the early church as they sought God's wisdom for the internal affairs of the church, such as choosing its leaders. We know from James that God generously gives wisdom to those who ask him for it. So, early in Acts, the church prays together for wisdom when selecting a replacement for Judas among the disciples. They prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry . . ." (Acts 1:24-25). And through the casting of lots, God gave them the name of Matthias. Thus prayer is a means that God has given his church through which he guides the church.

3. Our Dependence Glorifies God

Third, God is glorified through our dependence on him in united prayer.

Earlier we talked about how prayer magnifies God by showing our dependence upon him. That dependence is particularly striking when God's people gather together to praise his name, confess their sins, and make their requests known to him. Why? Because such prayer clearly displays our dependence on God to a watching world; it expresses audibly our needs in a powerful way.

In corporate prayer we show our utter dependence to God as a church.

4. Our Unity Glorifies God

Fourth, God is glorified through the unity of our prayer.

As we've heard in past classes, unity among God's people glorifies God. That's why in Paul calls on the *entire church* in Ephesians 4 to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Praying together is one way that we satisfy this command—it visibly unites us together as God's people.

But there's also a special unity through corporate prayer aside from the unity displayed in the physical gathering. When Holy-Spirit-indwelt Christians come together to pray, there is a unique kind of unity and power in the Spirit. Not only do we commune with God, we can trust that a special communion occurs with each other as the Spirit works in us simultaneously and gives a common faith and heart for God's will.

Two things to take away from this section: (i) we grow spiritually as we hear others commit to prayer; (ii) we offer a powerful witness to non-Christians who see the love and commitment that we have for one another in our prayers.

III. HOW DOES CORPORATE PRAYER PROMOTE UNITY?

That's the "why" of corporate prayer. Now, let's get to the "how." How does corporate prayer promote unity in our church—and what can we do as church members to further that end? Let me walk you through three ways that corporate prayer promotes unity.

1. Corporate Prayer Draws Us Together

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that praying together has a natural tendency to draw people closer.

When we pray together, we are leaving behind our own selfish desires and focusing on God and others. So, for example, on Sunday evenings, our church prays for each other in various ways: we thank God for his grace in people's lives; we ask him to heal the sick; we thank him for the good things he has given, like children and marriages; we ask him to bless various ministry and evangelistic opportunities; we ask him to comfort the hurting; and so forth. Both praying for others, and hearing others pray for us, naturally draws us closer together as we learn more about each other and, as we feel the effect of those prayers in the work accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes you'll the pastors describe the evening service as our family time. Praying together draws us together as a family.

How then can we be good stewards of this gift of united prayer? One way is to pursue opportunities to pray with others. For example, have a time of prayer in your small groups (which I trust many of the groups already have). Pray before studying the Scriptures, and then pray for each other so that unity is fostered. And when you pray in small groups, don't just have one person pray but have everyone pray. For example, you can have each person pray for the person on their right or left.

Other opportunities include praying as a family, praying before meals with friends, praying with missionaries, praying with co-workers or friends we see during the week. And you can probably think of many more ways.

One more opportunity to consider is whether there are prayer requests you could share with the congregation that could draw us together and help us as a body to marvel at the power and mercy of God. Think of corporate prayer *for you* as a service *to this congregation*. For some of us, that might feel a bit strange. We're fairly private people who think of asking others to pray for us as placing a burden on them. But that's not how the Bible views things. There's a great passage in 2 Corinthians 1 where Paul is sharing about a particularly difficult situation.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (2 Cor. 1:8-11).

That last verse is right on point: "Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many." Was it a burden on these believers to pray for Paul? Absolutely not. It was a tremendous blessing to lift him up and share in the joy of God's continual deliverance of him. What if Paul had decided that his problems weren't worth bothering the church? We should thank God that he did not.

So think about how you can share your needs with others so that we may be drawn together as believers and encouraged by God's amazing work. Are you struggling in your faith? Are you struggling at work? Are you struggling in your marriage? Are you struggling with evangelism? I remember when a brother in this church shared on Sunday night that he was struggling with his belief in God. His openness was a good example for us. As the church rallied around him in prayer, we were all able to praise God as our prayers were answered. Allow others to bring you before our Lord in prayer—it is a privilege for them.

2. Corporate Prayer Fosters a God-Centered Mindset

A second way corporate prayer builds unity in the church is that it makes us more like-minded theologically as scriptural truths—such as God's glory and sovereignty—are applied to various situations and circumstances.

God through his Word shapes and molds our minds to know his truths. Prayer gives us an opportunity to apply these truths to specific prayer situations. As God-centered prayers are vocally shared among Christians, they bring greater unity by growing this God-centered mindset among those in attendance.

I think the clearest example of this in our church life occurs in our Sunday evening times. I've been very encouraged in listening to the prayers during that service—not because of how eloquent they may or may not be; not because of their level of sophistication or simplicity; but because they increasingly reflect the truths of scripture.

The Sunday evening prayer time has helped me to pray more biblically, and therefore caused me to be more like-minded with others. Here are some examples of common scriptural themes that I continuously hear on Sunday nights:

- a desire to see God glorified whatever the circumstance;
- a recognition of God's sovereignty;
- praise for God's grace and mercy in Christ;
- praise for God's grace in others' lives;
- a desire for the gospel to be proclaimed among all peoples; and
- a recognition of our sin and hopelessness apart from Christ.

So in prayer, we unite around the truths of God.

The pastors and elders also try to foster this God-centered mindset through the various prayers in our Sunday morning service: the prayer of praise, prayer of confession, prayer of petition, and prayer of thanks. In these prayers, we seek to communicate the gospel by focusing on how God is worthy of all praise for who he is and what he has done, and how we are sinful, needy people in need of a Savior. Also, you may have noticed that often the themes in these prayers reflect the themes in the morning's text of Scripture.

While we're on this topic, let me address one issue that you might wonder about. Sometimes people observe that many of the men who lead our church in prayer on Sunday mornings have written out their prayers. That may strike you as a bit strange, maybe even inappropriate. After all, aren't our prayers supposed to be genuine—from the heart? And doesn't reading prayers lend itself to unhealthy motivations—seeking the adoration of men rather than God?

Concerning a prayer's genuineness, I don't think there's any reason to say that something that is spontaneous is somehow more genuine than something that's been carefully reflected upon and considered. Concerning an individual's motivation, well, the concern is certainly correct. Whether we are reading a prayer or praying spontaneously, we should pray to bring glory to God and not to ourselves. In other words, I'm not sure we can say that someone who prays spontaneously is any less susceptible to wrong motivations as someone who writes out his prayers beforehand.

The important thing to remember here is, the person leading corporate prayer is responsible for leading the prayer in a way that teaches and edifies the whole congregation. Thus, it's often helpful to spend time in advance thinking through how one can pray in a way that edifies the congregation.

Given that praying together fosters unity by making us more like-minded as we hear God-centered prayers, how can we be good stewards of our prayer time?

Let me suggest several ways:

#1—Pray the prayers of Scripture. The Bible presents us with actual examples of prayers that we can pray. Think of the Psalms. Think of Daniel 9. Think of the Lord's Prayer. Think of all of Paul's wonderful prayers, as you'll often find at the beginning of his letters (for example Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; Phil. 1:3-6; Col. 1:9-14; 1 Thes. 2:3-4; let me also recommend to you a book: "A Call to Spiritual Reformation" by D.A. Carson, which looks specifically at the prayers of Paul.)

#2—Pray the commands of Scripture. Think of the different things Scripture commands God's people to do, from the Ten Commandments to Paul's commands to put off the old man and put on the new man. As you pray for God's people, ask God to help them fulfill what he requires of them.

#3—Pray the "ambitions" of Scripture. That may sound like a strange way of putting it, but consider what Scripture is ambitious about for the lives of God's people. For example, praying for someone who is ill involves praying that God would comfort and heal the person, but it also means asking God to use that illness for that person's spiritual good and God's glory. We know from scripture that God often uses trials in the lives of his people for just these purposes. Another way of summarizing this point would be to say, Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness in your public prayers.

#4—Pray the promises of Scripture. The Scriptures are filled with promises for God's people, and we're told that all of God's promises are "yes" and "amen" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). There are countless examples I could point to. Here's one—Isaiah 41:10: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you

with my righteous right hand." So are you in a time of trial or tragedy? Go to the Lord and pray this promise back to him: "Lord, based on the righteousness of your Son which you have mercifully granted to me by faith, please, fulfill this promise: strengthen me; help me; uphold me. Your Word promises that you will, and so I fall entirely on this promise!"

#5—Pray with faith. Of course, when we pray, we should have faith that God can indeed answer that prayer.

3. Corporate Prayer Creates a Unity of Purpose

A third way that corporate prayer creates unity is by uniting Christians around the ministries of the church.

If you attend our Sunday evening service, you will hear a number of announcements about the various ministries at our church, which we then pray for. As the church listens and prays, we become excited together about church plants in Central Asia and Northern Virginia, or about our outreach to other churches through the Weekenders or the latest publications that Nine Marks is working on. Thus, our unity is fostered in corporate prayer as we grow and unite around a common vision of ministry.

IV. PRAYING INDIVIDUALLY FOR UNITY IN THE CHURCH

We've been spending most of our time talking about the importance of corporate prayer in our church. But, of course, private prayer is also important in our church. There are many ways private can be used to build unity in our church. Let me draw your attention briefly to four of them.

1. Pray for the Preacher and His Sermon

As we taught in previous weeks of this class, preaching is the most important thing we do together as a church. Accordingly, we should specifically pray for that time by praying for those preaching and those listening to God's Word.

Over and over the apostle Paul pleads with the church body to specifically lift him up in prayer. So he says to the Ephesians, "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains" (Eph. 6:19; also Col. 4:2-4).

How specifically can we pray corporately for the preacher (in addition of course to our individual prayers)? Two thoughts:

First, use the time while the offering plate is passed—right before the sermon—to pray for the sermon, for the preacher, for your own heart, and for the hearts of others. Ask God to encourage and strengthen the preacher to proclaim God's word effectively and powerfully. Pray that the Spirit would convict people of their sin, turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, and grant an people a desire for God in all his goodness and glory.

Second, use your small groups or family time during the week to pray for Sunday's preaching and the church's times of teaching generally. Just include that as a regular prayer item along with your prayers for each other.

2. Pray Through the Church Directory

In addition to praying for the preacher and his sermon, we should pray for the members of the church. One way to do this is to pray regularly through the church directory, whether by yourself or with others. Pray through the directory one page a day. Ask people how you can pray for them as you have occasion. And then let them know that you have prayed for them. This will encourage others and promote unity.

3. Pray for the Church's Various Ministries and Evangelistic Outreaches

In addition to praying for the preaching and for members individually, we should pray for the church's outreach. Praying for our various forms of outreach unites our hearts around common ambitions. How can you do this? First, join us on Sunday nights. If you are not used to attending church twice on Sundays, it may seem like a bit of a challenge at first, but this is a wonderful time where the family gathers together and prays. This is when we hear about many of the church's outreaches, evangelistic and otherwise. Second, take notes and then pray on your own through the week for the church's work outside its walls.

4. Pray for Problems in Our Church

Lastly, use your individual prayer time to lift up to God difficulties in our church. When you see something that bothers you—anything from someone struggling with anger to concerns about the building—then pray. You might decide to do other things as well, like address the matter to an elder. We're always happy to talking about these things with you. But always start by praying hard for us as a church. Don't just sit back and ignore a problems or complain about it. Pray. Ask God to give you a right heart, but also to preserve his church and to transform us more clearly into his image.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we've looked this morning at the importance of prayer in the church and how it promotes unity. We've also considered various ways that we, as members of this church, can foster unity through praying with others. I hope this class has encouraged you to strategize on how you can be good stewards of corporate prayer time, whether that's in our Sunday services, small groups, family devotionals, Angel Tree prayer meetings, morning prayer times, discipling relationships, or just impromptu prayer with others.

The Sunday School series of which this class is a part has been authored largely by Jamie Dunlop and Papu Sandhu. The May/June 2008 issue of the 9Marks eJournal plans to print the entire class.

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Book Reviews: Questioning Evangelism & Corner Conversations, By Randy Newman

Reviewed by Byron Straughn

Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did (Kregel, 2004, 240 pages, \$13.99)

&

Corner Conversations: Engaging Dialogues About God and Life (Kregel, 2006, 208 pages, \$13.99)

I know. We need another evangelism book like we need a hole in the head. I'm aware that there are numerous books on the topic of evangelism, some good and others disappointing, some geared toward instruction and others toward doctrinal fidelity.

Let me tell you why reading Randy Newman's books on the topic would be time well spent.

QUESTIONING EVANGELISM

Roughly speaking, his first book, *Questioning Evangelism*, is divided into three sections: 1) an apologetic for *why* asking questions in evangelism is needed, 2) a consideration of *what* questions non-believers are asking, and 3) and observations about *why* asking questions/knowing answers doesn't necessarily address a Christian's own issues like hard-heartedness or anger. Here's what I found unique or helpful about the book:

Wisdom

Throughout the book Newman brings readers back to Scripture. Although he appeals to accounts of people like Paul in Acts preaching on Mars Hill, he also shows how the wisdom literature of Proverbs and Job is applicable to our evangelistic endeavors. You see this as he makes a case for doing evangelism by asking questions—like Jesus does (e.g. Luke 20:1-8)—but also as he illustrates this literature's significance through real and fictional dialogues. (I can't say I've ever seen an evangelistic tract using Job.)

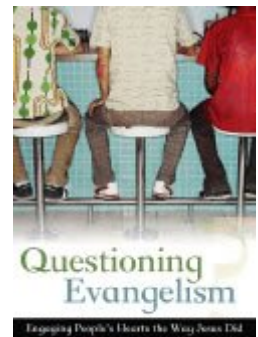
Not only does the reader see the wisdom Newman has gleaned from Scripture, one sees the wisdom gained from 25 years of ministry with students, professors, and neighbors. His personal examples don't end with every taxi driver praying to receive Christ, but the man has been fruitful.

Part of what motivates his instruction to do evangelism by asking questions stems from his desire for us to consider what is often below the surface of a conversation. He writes, "Often, when someone asks, 'How can you believe in a god who allows evil?' the real question is something else. It could be, 'Why should I *follow* a god who allows evil?' (120)." This kind of discernment requires knowledge of the human heart. Only when we understand where someone is coming from can we offer "an answer to a different question than the one they posed, but it's the answer that they really need."

Let me say that I believe the ability to ask questions is a skill that Christians should practice and refine, and not just for evangelism's sake. We use questions in formulating or leading bible studies. We use questions in understanding or shepherding our children. We use questions in wanting to understand and even possibly confront an erring brother or sister. Communicators even use questions rhetorically in sermons or speeches. Newman's desire to see believers learn to ask better questions in evangelism can be applied to ministry and life generally.

Humor

Though the book deals with the weighty issue of evangelism, Newman frequently throws in light and funny comments. He begins his book with some examples of the kinds of questions he asked growing up in a Jewish family (26).



Randy: How's the weather down there?

Granny Belle: How could the weather be in Florida in the middle of July?

Randy: How have you been?

Uncle Nat: Why do you ask?

Randy: How is your family?

Aunt Vivian: Compared to whom?

After describing an escalating conversation he had on campus with a student, Newman tells us he "laughed inwardly at the thought of a New York Jew debating with a Middle Eastern Muslim about Christianity in front of a table marked, "Campus Crusade!" There is even humor woven into the fictional conversations, reminding us that Christians can laugh—even with non-believers; and humor helpfully provides a little break in what can sometimes become intense conversations.

Compassion

One of great aspects of his book is the compassion that's evident even in some of the most heated discussions about skepticism or homosexuality. Newman obviously has heartfelt sympathy toward those who don't believe Christianity—even for those who might be hostile. What's at stake is more than persuasion or helping someone to see the futility of their worldview. All our interaction with non-believers flow from our desire to see the one true God worshipped and adored and for people to know the joy of living for this God. Newman describes situations throughout the book and the appropriate range of emotions that correspond to them, from terrorists and 9/11 to the cancerous death of a sibling. He rightly reminds us that the enemy isn't flesh and blood.

Gospel

One of the best aspects of the book is how Newman is able to move from a particular topic to the gospel. You see his ability to listen, ask questions, get to deeper heart issues, and steer the conversation towards Christ. I remember hearing D.A. Carson say something about no matter where you start in evangelism, your discussions should eventually drive toward the cross of Christ.

Does that mean I see a guy with a few earrings and say, "Hey, did you know Jesus was *pierced* for our transgressions?" Or that we should do what one pastor told me he always does on airplanes by asking people about "the weather"—*whether they were going to heaven or hell?* No, that's not what Newman does. He is sensitive, tactful and intentional, not shallow or superficial.

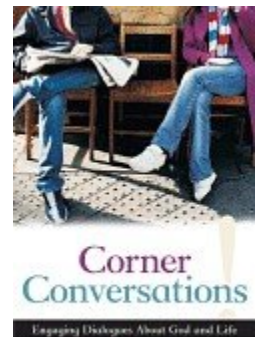
Beginning on page 186, he offers a dialogue of a believer and non-believer progressing in their conversation from sex to marriage to the gospel. The fictional dialogues help to illustrate that asking questions lead to deeper issues which are finally and ultimately answered only in the person of Christ.

CORNER CONVERSATIONS

This is probably a natural time to talk about his second book, which is not necessarily the sequel to the first book. *Corner Conversations* is actually intended for non-Christians. It answers some of their objections to the faith (hypocrisy, reliability of Scripture, homophobia, etc) and, as I mentioned above, draws clear paths toward the gospel. Here is where you see discernment, theology, and apologetics woven together into evangelistic dialogue. There are seven conversations which read like plays. He sets up the scene, introduces the characters, and begins the dialogues. I found myself scratching my head, laughing, and, at one point, feeling sincerely choked up.

What you *won't* find in the dialogues are a Christian version of how the media portrays evangelicals. On television Christians are usually stupid, greasy, and wimpy. Newman doesn't fall to such levels. Non-believers are belittled. He creates (fictional) conversations that are realistic or even adapted from his own experiences. People speak to each other as peers, friends, or family members. You don't see the double-PhD adult taking on a snooty little pre-K. The conversations are fair; Newman had various critics read his manuscript to make sure he was portraying the other side accurately (13).

The book is explicitly written by a Christian with Christian commitments (13), but it's not bogged down with Christian terminology that would lose a non-believer. One of the thoughtful features behind the book is how it leads the reader to more. Each conversation can be read in one sitting and leaves the reader needing to think more, unlike sitcoms where the world's problems are solved in 30 minutes. No, these dialogues move a person towards Christ.



Randy Newman

At the end of each chapter, Newman includes a small section called "Keeping the Conversation Going," which provides suggestions for further reading and reflection. It includes related biblical passages or books like Job or Romans 1-2. Also included are Christian books like *How Long, O Lord* by Carson or *The Problem of Pain* by Lewis—sometimes with a short synopsis or recommendation. Every once in a while he lists a website, to which I'm sure all the postmodern people say, *Amen!*

In addition to giving this book to non-Christians, believers will find still other uses for it. It could be used in a discipleship relationship with other Christians to talk more about evangelism. Of course, his first book might be more explicit in terms of teaching, but the second book really helps one to see how evangelistic exchanges could go.

A Christian could benefit from reading it to see how they could have turned a conversation about death and the afterlife towards Christ. I found myself a few times thinking, "I wish I would have done that" or "Oh, that is creative." There's a lot to learn by observing others who may be more experienced or mature in different areas of life and ministry.

This book would supplement or compliment a Sunday School class on evangelism or apologetics by showing how one takes the orthodox theology and blends it into everyday discussion. One of the valuable lessons from the book is how just about anything in life can be redeemed and guided towards life's ultimate questions and the Savior. Evangelism doesn't have to be only "random," but natural relationships can be cultivated as God-given means of witnessing.

Randy Newman didn't pay me to say this. You might be wondering if I had some disclaimers or caveats for the books. I do. First of all, the covers aren't very attractive. They aren't horrible, but they could do better. Second, if you're a strict presuppositional apologetics person, you won't agree completely with Newman's lightly seasoned evidences approach. Third, if you have no patience for dialogue or get lost with who's talking, you might want to read the second book, *Corner Conversations*, with a friend or just out loud to yourself switching back and forth between different voices. Last, there was a spot in *Corner Conversations* where I wanted to see more certainty in terms of epistemology, but it is possible that Newman simply didn't develop all of his thought for brevity's or conversation's sake.

All in all, Newman's books are worthwhile reads. If you wanted to cluster a few books to develop an evangelism curriculum for your church or some essential titles to add to a church (or personal) library, then consider these: Randy Newman's *Questioning Evangelism*, Will Metzger's *Tell the Truth*, J.I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*—oh, and Mark Dever's *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*. Keep a couple of *Corner Conversations* on hand to give away to a friend or co-worker as you develop relationships with them.

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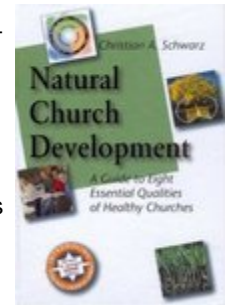
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Book Review: *Natural Church Development*, by Christian Schwarz Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Natural Church Development: A guide to Eight Essential Questions of Healthy Churches (St. Charles, Illinois, Church Smart Resources, 2006, \$20.00)

The stats on the back of Christian Schwarz's *Natural Church Development* are truly impressive. First published in 1996, the book—which is really only the tip of a whole iceberg of programs and services—has been implemented in more than 45,000 churches in 70 countries. Moreover, the program claims a remarkable success rate: Those churches which implement the Natural Church Development (NCD) program show an average increase of 6 points on their "quality index" (more on that later), and a 51 percent increase in their rate of growth.



Despite all the statistics, Schwarz is adamant that NCD is *not* your typical church growth program. He's right, at least in some respects. In other ways, though, NCD reads and acts like any number of other church growth books. It uses the same tech-inspired (and sometimes inscrutable) language, trades in the same social-science tools of surveys and statistics, and promises the same results. Let me put the bottom line like this, in the spirit of *Natural Church Development*: Schwarz's book may not be the same species as other church growth programs, but there's no doubt it's in the same genus.

NOTEWORTHY

I think it is fair to say that of all the church growth books I have read, I probably learned the most from this one. There are genuinely noteworthy chapters of this book that I'm sure will affect the way I think about long-term planning.

What most noticeably sets NCD apart from much other church growth literature is Schwarz's emphasis on what he calls the "all by itself principle." By this he means, growth in a church cannot be manufactured, systematized, or caused. Like plants in the field, church growth happens "all by itself"—which Schwarz is quick to say on page 14 is really "a work of God." All we can do is remove impediments to that growth. We can plant, we can water, we can even out the pH of the soil, but we cannot cause growth. Growth happens "all by itself" when nothing stands in the way. Schwarz puts the idea like this: natural church development means "releasing the divine growth forces by which God himself grows his church" (15).

It seems to me that this emphasis—and it *is* an emphasis in Schwarz's book, not just a head-nod—leads to some good correctives to the typical church growth mentality. Take Schwarz's approach to numerical church growth, for example. He hopes primarily not to see churches increase in quantity, but rather in quality. He wants to see churches grow first in eight specific "quality characteristics"; and if that happens, numerical growth will naturally follow. The shift is perhaps subtle, but it is important. The major emphasis is not on the size of the church, but on the life of the church. Moreover, in a sharp three pages of his book (104-106), Schwarz sets NCD apart from the overt pragmatism that marks so much of the larger church growth movement. Here are his points about pragmatism:

1. "Pragmatism as a worldview is rooted in the a priori rejection of binding principles." While church growth leaders may not mean the word to carry that connotation, "it is fitting to ask why they use this term at all, considering its historical background."
2. "The pragmatic approach has the inherent danger of making success the ultimate theological criterion." In other words, anything that leads to numerical growth must be a good thing.
3. "Pragmatists always ask the same question: 'What is most effective in this situation for church growth?'" That question is short-sighted, looking for immediate results rather than long-term maturation.
4. "Pragmatists have a tendency to determine their own opinion on what is important for the kingdom of God," rather than looking to biblical principles. "The end does not always justify the means."

5. "Pragmatism conflicts with the biblical principle which states that a good tree bears good fruit (Matthew 7:17)." Pragmatists tend to fall for artificial fruit, pointing to it as evidence that their techniques must be good ones.

6. "Pragmatic thinking easily becomes fertile soil for opportunism. Going with the flow, adjusting to questionable current trends, using manipulative marketing methods, even cooperating with corrupt political leaders—all for the well-being of the church, of course—these can be consequences of a strongly developed 'pragmatic' thinking."

That is a good critique of pragmatism, and it's also concise enough that it could be printed or even memorized for use when the need arises.

Another really helpful part of Schwarz's book is his discussion of what he calls "the NCD growth spiral." The idea is that church leaders should lead their congregations through a series of six different thought processes over a period of time, say a year. The cycle is a circle, Schwarz insists, so there's no specific starting point—you begin wherever you determine your church is at the moment—but the six steps are Perceive, Test, Understand, Plan, Do, and Experience. There's no need to explain fully the ins and outs of each of those steps here, but they seem to comprise a pretty good thought-structure for church leaders to use as they think about the future of their churches.

A HEADS-UP

If you do pick the book up for the reasons above, however, let me offer a heads-up about a few things before you delve into it.

Opacity

First of all, there are parts of the book that were, to me at least, utterly opaque. I could not understand them, and I tried hard. Most of Part 4, "A New Paradigm," which lays out Schwarz's theological justification for the book, I found to be almost entirely confusing. I got the large point Schwarz was trying to make—that NCD is neither technocratic nor spiritualistic—but I still have no idea why he insists on calling spiritualism "dualistic" and technocracy "monistic." (And I don't find his illustration about the speakers on page 90 to be all that illustrative of the point, either.)

Nor am I sure what it means to say that the dynamic pole produces the static pole and the static pole stimulates the dynamic pole, though all that seems important. If you've read the book, perhaps this is clearer to you than it is to me. And if you haven't, then you already see my point.

Statistical Snookering

Another warning: Through much of the book, especially Part 1, "Eight Quality Characteristics," I could not help but feel that Schwarz was pulling the statistical wool over my eyes. He does not include anything approaching a full report of his survey's results. He only gives us the results, here and there, of a few questions from the survey, and I found it hard sometimes to see how the results of those questions supported his point.

One example should suffice, though I could tease out several if I had the space. On pages 32-33, Schwarz makes the case for one of his quality characteristics—an "inspiring worship service." One of the survey questions whose results he lets us see is this: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Attending our worship services is an inspiring experience for me." Now, 80 percent of members of "high quality, growing" churches answered Yes to that question, which seems to be the most important point Schwarz wants us to take away. But here's the rub: 72 percent of members of "high quality, *declining*" churches also answered Yes. And so did 60 percent of "low quality, growing" churches. I'm no statistics expert, and Schwarz doesn't tell us what raw numbers stand behind those percentages, but I can't see how these percentages by themselves establish any kind of conclusive evidence that an inspiring worship service correlates with growth, or even perhaps with quality. It certainly doesn't seem to support Schwarz's statement that "It is this criterion which demonstrably separates growing churches from stagnant and declining ones."

More to the point, the reason I felt a bit statistically snookered is because of the color-coding on Schwarz's graphs. In almost every graph Schwarz uses to press home the importance of his eight quality characteristics, there is a huge gap between the pink "high quality" churches and the orange "low quality" churches. In every characteristic, "high quality" churches answered Yes to questions about Schwarz's "quality characteristics" at much higher rates than "low quality" ones did. But the problem with that, of course, is that he's defining "high quality churches" precisely as those which, among other things, have inspiring worship services. It's tautological, akin to being amazed that 85% of conservatives believe in small government, after you've defined "conservative" as "someone who believes in small government." How much does it really tell us to say that huge numbers of churches in the "high quality" category answered Yes to the questions that would get them into the "high quality"

category? Moreover, on many of the questions (like the one above about inspiring worship services), it is hard to see much correlation at all between those quality characteristics and whether a church is growing or declining. If you want to explore that correlation, though, you'll have to ignore Schwarz's color-coding on his graphs, because the visual impact of them is the usually enormous (and not surprising at all if you think about it) drop-off from pink "high-quality" to orange "low-quality."

Why These Eight?

That brings me to another point, which is perhaps the biggest weakness of Schwarz's book. It's not clear at all where Schwarz comes up with his eight quality characteristics, nor is it clear why these characteristics should be favored over any other eight that one might devise. Here are the eight characteristics Schwarz identifies: empowering leadership, gift-based ministry, passionate spirituality, effective structures, inspiring worship service, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. The closest that Schwarz comes to giving us the origin of these eight points is on page 40, where he says that these characteristics "had already proved to be relevant to church growth in our pre-studies." There's no explanation beyond that, and to be honest, I have seen so many lists claiming to be "proven" by "research" to be the key to church growth that it's going to take more than an assurance of pre-studies proving their relevance to church growth to cause me to put any stock in them.

Beyond that, I just do not see anything all that inspiring or even helpful about this list of quality characteristics. None of them are distinctively Christian, and several of them seem to spring from early-90s fads. Spiritual gifts inventories were in hot vogue when I was in high school, and small groups, too, only recently hit the big-time. Here's an interesting thought experiment: Would any church in, say, early Puritan America or Reformation Europe have scored very high on Schwarz's quality index? For that matter, what would happen if we gave these surveys to some of America's growing Mormon wards? Are we going to say that those are "quality churches," too? Schwarz says he is in the process of writing a third book about NCD, one "which will present the foundational authority behind the principles of NCD: Scripture" (5). It will be interesting to see the scriptural case for holistic small groups.

On top of that, one cannot help but notice the absence of a few things that Scripture itself might hold out as "quality characteristics." Does preaching not have anything to do with whether a church grows or is a quality church? What about the right administration of the ordinances? What about an evangelical theology? I'm not saying that every book needs to be a systematic theology, but these eight characteristics just seem a bit arbitrary to me—as arbitrary as any other of the hundreds of lists of "research-proven" characteristics or techniques that you can find at your local Christian bookstore.

ALL IN ALL

All in all, *Natural Church Development* is a mixed bag. Schwarz comes up with a few really useful ideas, but he has also fallen into what I consider the great trap of church growth literature—the idea that research can identify a list of things which, if a church were to implement them, will almost certainly lead to numerical growth (see Schwarz's assurances, for example, on pages 3 and 41).

We've said it before, but it bears repeating. You can look at a thousand different research projects, compare their thousand different results, and it will still be better, safer, and simpler to base your church's practice on Scripture, to do what it commands, and, in the best tradition of natural church development, to then leave the growth to God.

Greg Gilbert is an elder at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, the director of research for the president's office at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Ph.D. student in church history.

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Book Review: *Advanced Strategic Planning*, by Aubrey Malphurs *Reviewed by Owen Strachan*

Advanced Strategic Planning (Baker Books, 2005, 384 pages \$20.99)

It's always refreshing to read the work of a man who loves the local church, and Aubrey Malphurs, a church planting consultant and Dallas Seminary professor, surely does. The whole purpose of his book *Advanced Strategic Planning* is to help local churches become healthy and biblical. He hopes to do this through the process of strategic planning.



OVERVIEW

Malphurs begins *Advanced Strategic Planning* by identifying the following problem, endemic among American churches. The "life cycle" of many churches is reflected in what is called a "Sigmoid curve," or an S-curve, in which a church begins well, trends up, but eventually declines.

He summarizes the problem this way: "The message or lesson of the sigmoid curve is that all good things (and even some bad things) end...Even brand-new institutions and organizations such as a church will, in time, plateau and then die. No matter what institution it is, organizational "dry rot" sets in. The institution becomes brittle, ceases to function, and expires" (11).

What's the solution for this sad situation? The church must "launch new S-curves" (14), a process carried out through the work of strategic planning. In strategic planning, one goes about "discovering your core values; developing a mission, a vision, and a strategy," and then implementing this knowledge (14).

These ideas, presented in the first pages of the book, form the bulk of Malphurs's solution to the problem of church decline. The following three hundred pages unfurl this strategy for improving churches, elucidating in depth his belief in such ideas as "dream planning," vision and mission statements, the assembling of a "ministry dream team," and a "Strategic Initiation Team."

STRENGTHS

1. Love for the Local Church

The most obvious strength of *Advanced Strategic Planning* is the one I already mentioned. Malphurs has a heart for the local church. He's particularly burdened for the contemporary church, which he likens "to a ship without a compass, drifting aimlessly on the ocean" (31). The ship is struggling to stay afloat, buffeted by "the winds of change and the currents of postmodernism" which threaten to lead "the church even farther off course." The strategic planning process is simply Malphurs's response to this crisis. This heart for the local church shows itself in numerous places throughout the book and marks it as a text which seeks to be part of the solution, not the problem.

2. Desire for Congregational Harmony

Throughout the book, one detects a genuine desire to preserve the unity and harmony of the church's fellowship in the midst of the strategic planning process. For example, in speaking about the necessary communication between pastor and congregation, Malphurs writes, "If you conduct secret meetings and fail to communicate in general what happens in those meetings, you will not be able to lead the congregation, because they will not trust you....During the strategic planning process, as well as at any other time, you must communicate, communicate, and then communicate some more" (63).

Such advice shows clear concern for the harmony of the body. Malphurs evinces care for the churches that he seeks to assist.

3. Focus on Theology

Malphurs attempts to ground his call for strategic planning in the Bible. Before he lays out the various suggested steps for strategic planning, he offers an 11-page section on the spiritual principles that must undergird the planning process (79-90).

His steps are simple but needed. Each is grounded in Scripture. Examples of this include Malphurs's call for church discipline, as well as an encouragement to the congregation to submit to the church's leadership. In each of these matters, as in others, Malphurs seeks to ground the planning process in scriptural principle and godly behavior.

WEAKNESSES

1. Overemphasis on Strategic Planning

In general, it seems that Malphurs places too much value in strategic planning. He seems to regard it as the principal means by which struggling churches may be saved from dissolution.

It's true that some measure of strategic planning can be helpful. For example, Malphurs's exhortation to pastors to think through the identity of their church and the people they are targeting is excellent. With this noted, I think Malphurs overestimates the value of strategic planning. Does not the health of the local church depend most on its preaching of the Word, its exercise of the ordinances, and its cultivation of healthy body life and evangelistic outreach?

Insofar as the church does contain institutional elements, there is a place for strategic planning. Many churches have not thought enough about their purpose and their mission, and such thinking can do much to revive tired congregations. That said, Malphurs's model focuses too much on the church as institution and not enough on the church as family, flock, or bridegroom of God. This overly institutional focus leads to an institutional solution for the church's problems. This solution, in turn, leads us away from the plain biblical means of church health and growth.

2. Unhelpful Means of Evaluation

Malphurs encourages the church to evaluate itself, which in itself is a healthy idea. His form of measurement, however, is concerning.

Evaluation takes place according to "PIs," performance indicators that reveal the church's progress toward its goals. For example, one might evaluate the effectiveness of a "seeker service" by the number of baptisms, or the effectiveness of personal evangelism by the number of professions of faith (307).

While numbers may reflect the blessing of God on our ministry, they may also reflect other realities. Our numbers may be high because our doctrine is shallow and easy to stomach. Our evangelism may appear fruitful because our evangelistic program goes soft on hell and perseverance. Isn't it better to evaluate one's church according to its faithfulness to Scripture?

3. Strange Model of Polity

Advanced Strategic Planning offers a confused summary of traditional polity and then presents an innovative model to replace it.

Malphurs rejects the traditional elder-led polity of the Bible and conflates it with elder-rule. He explains that "Government by elders or elder rule is when power is vested in a governing board of elders and not in the congregation. Thus the congregation has no power, not even when it acts corporately, which is rare if it happens at all" (218).

Seeking to avoid this problem, he proposes a unique polity, one based not in the New Testament's outline for a church, but "in the various passages that address the wisdom of teams," all of which come from Proverbs. The "board" model is basically this: "the board should be made up of the board members and pastor, and there should be a board chairman and probably certain committees" (215).

The abuse of eldership can and does happen. Perhaps Malphurs has seen this in action, and thus he avoids elder-based polity. Regardless, it is a happy fact there are many elder-led churches today that are richly congregational and that invest considerable weight in the church body's vote (I have belonged to two).

One understands Malphurs's attempt to avoid a harsh and disenfranchising model of church government, but one wonders whether Malphurs has misunderstood biblical polity and reacted to a caricature of it.

CONCLUSION

Advanced Strategic Planning reveals a heart for the local church that is missing from much of the contemporary literature on the church. It is an energetic, innovative, and scripturally-minded book. But I'm not sure if Malphurs's solution, his strategic planning program, is the cure-all for the church's various maladies that he conceives it to be.

That said, Malphurs's diagnosis of the problems affecting many churches today hits home. Many churches today face decline or despair. Their members have grown discouraged. In these difficult times, though, we have a great hope. The Lord is sovereign over his church, and he rewards those faithful to his Word. He will not abandon us. In days of great change and struggle, this is our confidence.

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