

Concerts of Prayer - Thomas J. Nettles

Ordinary Prayer

Scripture leaves the Christian no doubt about the duty of prayer. "You ought always to pray, and not to faint," our Lord said (Luke 18:1), and Paul exhorts, "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17).

Our dependence on God for all things fills the believer most especially in times of prayer; the recognition of such dependence is always fitting in the creature's relation to the creator, but more especially in the sinner's relation to the Savior. Paul emphasized this to the Colossians when he exhorted them to be "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col. 1:12).

Prayer also is a joyful privilege. Coming as a beloved child to a loving father is a happy situation in itself; more than that, however, when the loving Father is the God of Peace who has every reason to be the God of wrath, our invitation to appear before him makes all earthly joys fade with the infinite wonder of such a privilege. According to Paul, when we come to the God of Peace in prayer "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6,7,9).

Not only is prayer a duty as well as a privilege, in the providence of God it is effectual for the accomplishing of God's will. Paul's confidence of deliverance from prison rested on Your [the Philippians'] prayers and the provision of the Holy Spirit" (Phil 1:19). John reminded his beloved brethren of the confidence we may have that in praying according to His will ... we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (I John 5:14,15). James reminds us that "effective prayer" accomplishes much (James 5:16). Paul displays prayer as a part of the ongoing armor of the Christian in this life to be used for all saints and especially for those who preach the gospel (Eph 6:18-20).

Extraordinary Prayer

With prayer such a pervasively ordinary part of Christian life and ministry,

how does it come about that an "extraordinary" effort in prayer may be made? Jonathan Edwards, no despiser of the ordinary means of grace, believed that specific gospel promises or prophecies could become matters for the focused prayers of God's people.

"That which God abundantly makes the subject of his promises, God's people should abundantly make the subject of their prayers."

Such a prophetic promise appears in Zechariah 8:20-22, according to Edwards, which had not been fulfilled but which held a mighty prospect for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth." So far," Edwards said, "There has never yet been any propagation and prevalence of religion, in any wise, of that extent and universality which the prophecies represent." He believed this was speaking of the latter day glory and thus constituted a biblically sanctioned reason for concentrated, importunate, extraordinary prayer.

This very promise, Edwards held, legitimates the bold exhortation of Isaiah 62:6,7, that encourages the watchmen never to keep silent and to give Him no rest until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth." Because of the greatness of the latter day glory, Christ's own exertions and sufferings for that day, and the travailing of the whole creation for it, Christians should "earnestly seek it and be much in prayer for it."

Concerted Prayer

Edwards made an urgent appeal encouraging gatherings for extraordinary prayer, known as Concerts of prayer." According to this plan, Christians of all denominations the world over who seek fervent piety, know the power of godliness, and believe gospel truth should agree in a friendly resolution to meet on an advantageous day to pray specifically for revival and the extension of the earthly kingdom of Christ."

The concept of a concert of prayer originated in 1744 in Scotland. A group of ministers covenanted to be given weekly to "united extraordinary supplications to the God of all grace...earnestly praying to Him that He would appear in His glory...by an abundant effusion of His Holy Spirit.. . to revive true religion in all parts of Christendom...and fill the whole earth with His glorying This practice spread throughout Great Britain, and a memorial

printed in 1746 inviting others to join in these praying societies found its way to New England. In January of 1748, after preaching a series of sermons to his congregation in favor of the practice, Jonathan Edwards published a treatise. The title describes its content: *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God 's People in Extraordinary Prayer, For the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth.*

This compelling entreaty for the practice of unified prayer for revival was widely received and implemented by Christians of all denominations. The English Particular Baptist John Sutcliff, who reprinted Edwards's *Humble Attempt* in 1789, described this union in prayer in the following words:

“ In the present imperfect state, we may reasonably expect a diversity of sentiments upon religious matters...Yet all should remember, that there are but two parties in the world, each engaged in opposite causes; the cause of God and of Satan; of holiness and sin; of heaven and hell. The advancement of the one, and the downfall of the other, must appear exceedingly desirable to every real friend of God and man....O for thousands upon thousands, divided into small bands in their respective cities, towns, villages, and neighbourhood, all met at the same time, and in pursuit of one end, offering up their united prayers, like so many ascending clouds of incense before the Most High!”

In the years immediately following this reprint, arising from a small group of Baptist preachers, including Sutcliff, joining in these concerts of prayer, came the beginning of the modern missions movement. During this time, Andrew Fuller wrote *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, and William Carey wrote *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* . These two books pricked the consciences and informed the minds of English Evangelicals concerning the duty and certain fruitfulness of evangelistic work among the unconverted. These advances did not come without controversy, but they began an era of world evangelization which under God has transformed the face of world Christianity.

The years 1857-1860 saw revival of sweeping proportions world-wide built

largely on concerts of prayer. Great variety in approach, intensity, and residual effect characterized this revival. Some places avoided preaching and theological analysis while others saw great doctrinal preaching combined with prayer as essential elements of the revival. Places where the revival had the healthiest results for the church's spirituality had the most pervasive mixture of preaching.

In conclusion, one should desire that extraordinary prayer be made for so glorious a design. Edwards remarked, One would think that each who favours the dust of Zion, when he hears that God is stirring up a considerable number of his ministers and people to unite in extraordinary prayer, for the revival of religion and the advancement of his kingdom, should greatly rejoice on this occasion."

Balanced Prayer

With this affirmation, however, several caveats are needed. Participants must ascertain that the ongoing ordinary means of grace centered in local church life should not suffer. The regular preaching and prayer meetings of the church should not be superseded or replaced.

Second, prayer and truth must not be viewed as hostile to each other. While unnecessary division must be avoided, preaching and the affirmation of truth enhance and inform prayer. Neither in the First Great Awakening nor in the missionary movement under Fuller and Carey was doctrinal preaching omitted. Sometimes even controversy was necessary if diversity centered on vital areas of truth.

Third, prayer must not be approached only as a means for the gain of something else. Prayer is in itself good and at the heart of our worship of the Triune God.

Finally, prayer does not allow human will to usurp the wisdom and decreed will of God. Even with his fervent call for Explicit agreement and visible union of God's people, in extraordinary prayer, Edwards concluded: "But whatever our hopes may be in this respect, we must be content to be ignorant of the times and seasons, which the Father hath put in his power; and must be willing that God should answer prayer, and fulfill his own glorious promises, in his own time."

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