

Devoted to Prayer

Acts 2:42

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Ten)

“They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts [...at the time of prayer...]” (Acts 2:46a; 3:1)

Message

We’re re-imagining the 21st century Church in light of the 1st century Church. We’re imagining what the Church might look like, actually would look like, if we take the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our life seriously.

Last month we focused on the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This month we have been looking at the early Church’s *Rule of Life* - i.e., the practices of the early Church that kept them walking close to Jesus and empowered by His Spirit. We began talking about being fully devoted to the *apostle’s teaching* - that is, to the Gospel, to God’s Word. Then we looked at being fully devoted to the *fellowship*, to the community, to *koinonia* (i.e., our/together life). Last week, we looked at being fully devoted the *breaking of bread*, an obvious a reference to the Lord’s Supper, but also to the importance of being and extending the family. This week we’ll be looking at prayer. These four “marks” go together; you can’t separate them; you can’t leave one out without doing damage to the whole thing!

Read: Acts 2:42 - *“They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

Read: Acts 2:46a - *“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts [...at the time of prayer...]”* (cf. **Acts 3:1**)

Tony Campolo tells of a Pentecostal College where he was often invited to conduct their chapels.

Campolo notes that he is not Pentecostal, but, he says, because he talks so fast it often sounds like he’s speaking in tongues. He says they like him at this college and he likes their passion and energy.

Before preaching, they always pray over the speaker - literally; so down on his knees, they put their hands on his head and pray...and pray.

On one occasion one of them went on and on about this guy named Charlie Stoltzman. *“Dear Lord, you know Charlie - he lives in the trailer down about a mile on Main, on the right hand side.* (Tony says he’s wondering why God needs to know Charlie’s address.)

Lord, Charlie told me this morning he is leaving his wife and three kids. He's walking out on his family, Lord, walk into Charlie's life, bring his family back together again." (Tony's just feeling the weight of these hands on his head). But this guy went on and on...

Tony finishes speaking, heads for home and is getting on the turnpike. He notices a hitchhiker. (Tony says he likes to pick up hitchhikers because he can talk about Jesus and they can't go anywhere.)

So he stops, this guy gets in. *"Hi, my name is Tony Campolo, what's yours?" "My name is Charlie Stoltzman."* (Wow!) Tony gets off at the next exit and heads back. After a few minutes, Charlie says, *"Mister, where are you taking me?" "Home!" "Why?" "Because you're leaving your wife and kids, right?!"*

Tony says he moved closer to the outside door and didn't take his eyes off Tony. Tony drives down Main Street and pulls up right next to his trailer. *"How did you know I live here!"* Tony said, *"God told me."*

Tony tells him to get out and get into the house. Charlie moved quickly. When he opened the door his wife exclaimed, *"You're back!"* He whispered something in her ear and her eyes got real big. Tony asked them to sit down; he wanted to talk to them. They sat down. He told them about Jesus. Today, Charlie is preacher. And there is an answer to prayer!

Our prayers - in the power of the Holy Spirit - that is, praying what the Holy Spirit prompts us to pray - leads to amazing things!

In reimagining Church, it is important to realize the **early church of 2000 years ago** had no building - no sound system, no video streaming capabilities, no comfortable seating, no air conditioning (or heat), no paved parking, no child care facility. There had no experienced pastors, no commentaries - in fact, the New Testament wasn't even complete. There was no budget, no long-range strategic plan, no process for appointing leaders.

And yet, they had 120 people one day and 3120 the next; the newest 3000 knew little more than what they've just heard Peter talking about - and they're still growing - at a significant rate.

In spite of **religious** and **political** opposition, the church continued to grow. By the end of Acts 28 (less than 30 years later), it was a **worldwide movement** to be reckoned with. **Acts 29**, as we know, is still being written; 2000 years later the church is still growing - just not in the United States and Western Europe but around the world.

How did it happen two thousand years ago? How is it still happening today?

First, the early Church prayed together (cf. **Acts 1:14**) and then the Holy Spirit came and went to work. He is still at work in our world.

Second, the early Church *"devoted [fully surrendered] themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"* (**Acts 2:42**) and *"the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"* (**Acts 2:47b**).

A primary reason the North American Church is declining today is that many of its members are no longer [fully] “*devoted to God’s Word, to the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer.*” Don’t miss the pattern of these four characteristics of the early Church: vertical, horizontal, horizontal, and vertical (God’s Word, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer). Life in the community we call “Church” begins and ends, starts and finishes, with the focus on God. It’s not about us.

We’ve already talked about the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread; this morning we’ll focus on the final one: prayer.

“CONSTANTLY”

Acts gives us a window into the prayer life of the disciples/early church. It begins in **Acts 1:14** - “*They all joined together constantly in prayer*” - they weren’t yet preaching or teaching or organizing...they were praying. . . . together.

In discerning the replacement disciple; they prayed (cf. **Acts 1:24**)

“*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together [praying] in one place...*” (**Acts 2:1**). They devoted themselves to prayer and “*the Holy Spirit came upon them.*” Are you praying?

I can't guarantee a great revival if you pray earnestly; I can guarantee nothing will happen if you don't. I can't promise 3,000 people will give their life to Christ in one day; I can promise God answers the prayers of his faithful followers.

Prayer is mentioned again here in **2:42** - in the “rule of life” for the early church: “*They devoted themselves to...prayer*”

Acts 3:1 underscores the rhythm of prayer in their lives; in **Acts 4:24**, they pray thanks together after Peter and John were released from prison; in **Acts 6**, deacons were chosen so the apostles could spend more time in prayer and the Word.

Repeatedly faced with persecution and imprisonment if they didn't stop preaching Jesus, they came together - not to pray for protection or relief, but to pray for boldness: **4:31** - “*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly.*”

The words, “prayer”, “pray”, and “praying” are used in Acts over 35 times; over two-thirds are corporate prayers (that is, people praying together in the same place); the others are all public prayers of the Church’s leaders. (That is, there are no private prayers recorded in Acts!)

Prayer was the life-blood of the early church. God constantly and consistently **moves** in response to our **prayers**.

The early Church believed God answered prayer and so they prayed! “*Why, if we really believe God answers prayer, are we praying so little?*” It’s a significant question!

Maybe a few years ago you saw *War Room* (i.e. a Prayer Room). Miss Clara has a place in her home she frequents to pray and to confront the power of sin in the world - and she battles for Tony and Elizabeth's marriage and family.

Some churches have similar "prayer" rooms; some are occupied 24/7; some have prayer stations focused on families, schools, church, community, and the world.

In churches that are growing - the prayer room is one of the busiest rooms in the church; leaders are prioritizing prayer in their meetings/gathering, weekly prayer meetings are high priorities. Churches seeing people coming to faith are striving to be houses of prayer; churches impacting their community regularly gather for prayer. Covenant has a prayer room. [Just a simple question:] "When was the last time you were there?"

Most churches I know (incl. Covenant) have hard working staffs, conscientious leaders; volunteers putting in long hours; good stewardship of their resources...

We believe when we **work hard** (and smart), God will **bless** our efforts, so we work hard; we work like it depends on us, but it doesn't. The great missionary/evangelist Hudson Taylor said "*When we work, **we** work; but when we pray, **God** works.*" The prophet **Zechariah** said: "*Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord.*" (4:6)

"BY MY SPIRIT"

We often substitute "by our **hard work" for "by my Spirit."** We often **talk** about the Holy Spirit's power; periodically we also sing about it.

At a recent Deeper Journey retreat, participants were wondering aloud why we're so shy about talking about the Holy Spirit and his power in the Church.

A few years ago I attended a conference entitled, "*Growing the Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit*" (It was free, so I knew I'd get my money's worth!)

We didn't talk about budgets, money, structure, governance, nominations, programs or even worship services (things that occupy most of our time, conversation, and attention in the church today). We talked about intercession, discernment, love, obedience, spiritual gifts, cooperating with the Holy Spirit, and Kairos moments - things we rarely discuss in the Church.

Ironically, we were not talking about things we think we can control; but about things we know are beyond our control. Our focus was on God and what God can do!

The early church had virtually nothing - no large buildings, LED signs, trained staff, sizeable budget, brochures of programs for all ages...and they were growing rapidly. They had few resources; but the ones they had they used.

In a recent survey taken during this pandemic, one of the major concerns of Church leaders/pastors is the significant decrease in revenue (no people in the seats, no money coming in). How can we keep the church going? The lights on? The staff employed? The bills paid?

Sadly, there have been few calls to pray, few prayer meetings, few prayer initiatives during this pandemic.

How often in our day and our decisions have we failed to **look up**? How often have we failed to **get down** on our knees? How often do we pretend it depends on us and we can handle it?

A week ago Friday night, I gathered with about 150 people to pray outside in the cold for well over an hour. It was incredible to be a part of a group who came together to intercede for Mark and LeAnne (Jansen). We prayed together in unity; we prayed with the confidence that God heard our pleading; we prayed with the Spirit in anticipation of God's intervention. It was an amazing illustration of the Christ's Church at work - of the Church being Church!

At the same time, I was deeply struck that it seems to take a life-threatening crisis for someone we know and love to get us to come together and pray. People gathering together for prayer are a rare occurrence today. Why is that?

This morning God is inviting us to use the resources he has provided - prayer and his Holy Spirit - as an integral part of our daily lives and rhythm.

"WHATEVER YOU ASK..."

Prayer reminds us of our dependence on God.

Jesus said: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

We spend enormous amounts of energy **planning**/administering and **programming**. We invest hours of our time in leading, teaching, and serving.

Whether we believe it or not, we live like our success is dependent on our ideas, our working hard, our getting it right, having a super facility and the latest technology - on Us!

"If we just had an interim pastor who had hair; when we just get the right pastor...; if we'd just have a small group/men's ministry; if everyone would just invite their neighbor; if more people would volunteer, if we were friendlier...; if we could just all agree on the right vision, Biblical interpretation, doctrine, worship style..."

These are all great things; but it's not by our might or power, but by God's Spirit.

We need to learn how to **cooperate** with (i.e., submit to) God and his Spirit. Only God can change a **heart**, transform a **life**, redeem a community, build a church, usher in his Kingdom.

God made **prayer** essential to the building of his church; when we prioritize prayer in our life and church we remember our dependence on him.

The invitation to Scripture and Prayer (remember the pattern) are an invitation to seek and prioritize God's will.

In prayer, we give God our **full attention**. Prayer requires us to **slow down**, to intentionally disengage from the fast pace of our full and busy lives. Prayer requires us, as the Psalmist writes, to be still and **know/remember** God is God.

We think prayer is primarily **talking** to God, but prayer is mostly about **listening** to God. Here in is the problem - we even think prayer is about us; so we think we can take it or leave it - use it when we need it. But prayer is ultimately an act of submission to God's will.

We can only hear God if we've slowed down and are listening; God is most clearly heard in our silence and solitude - that is, when we stop talking!

It is amazing how often we make significant decisions without ever committing the issue to **prayer** or searching the **Scripture** - even on the most critical of issues.

And we take our daily practices into church leadership; how much of our elders, deacons, council, congregational, staff, committee, ministry team meetings are spent in prayer? If prayer is the primary work of the church, shouldn't we be giving it primary attention?

Prayer is increasingly becoming a part of how we make decisions here; how about in our homes? How often do we get ahead of God... I had an elder in a former church say, "*We made the decision, then we prayed about it, and God confirmed what we decided*" (What?! That's not the way it works!)

We're in the middle of a pandemic; days from a national election that will impact our nation for decades to come; the results of racial tension dominate the news; we're a congregation in transition - beginning to think about a search process; *now* is the time to pray (truth is, *now* is always the time to pray!)

Prayer is the means through which God unleashes his power. Prayer in and of itself possesses no power. It doesn't change anything. But our prayer is **powerful** because God is **powerful**; prayer changes things **only** because God changes things. Prayer changes things because God said it would; God designed it that way - his **power** is released through **our prayers**.

In the final days of his ministry Jesus told his disciples he would be leaving them. This news brought some confusion and much fear. Where did this leave them? So Jesus said: -"*tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these (wow!) because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name...*" (John 14:12-13)

Jesus' work on earth would continue through his followers. Prayer would be the link that would provide the "power" to carry on his ministry.

Oliver Hallesby, in *The Church and Prayer*, says, "*Prayer is the most important work of the Church.*" Jesus said it this way: "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations!*" (Matt. 21:13).

Almost every Christian I've met believes prayer is important; and most Christians pray. But there is a significant difference between believing prayer is **important** and believing

prayer is **essential**. Sadly, the North American Church doesn't seem to see prayer as essential.

Bathing, brushing our teeth, flossing, personal grooming are all important; but breathing and hydrating are essential. Prayer is to the Christian life as breathing is to our human life.

Without prayer, the church has **no power** except what you and I can muster (so, basically - no power) (Let me ask some questions for reflection:)

If our prayer life is a barometer of our spiritual life, how is our spiritual life?

If our prayer life is the foundation of our church's ministry, how firm is our foundation?

If everyone prayed together as much as you pray together with fellow believers, how healthy would our church be?

When the Church prays Corporately - together in unity - the Spirit moves in power.

My mom had a light-switch that said: "*the family that **prays** together, **stays** together.*" That's also for God's family. God wants us to know that so he promises to release his power when we pray together in agreement about the same things over time.

We will see that the disciples modeled this kind of prayer throughout the book of Acts. **Sustained corporate prayer** is the secret, the foundation, to the building, growth and health of Christ's church.

"FULLY DEVOTED"

God longs to **ble**ss** this church in ways we haven't yet seen and can't begin to imagine**. He longs to unleash his power to build his kingdom, form disciples, and to reach lost people like never before.

But it will not happen until we (pastors, staff, leadership, members) make prayer the primary work of Christ's Church - this church - something we need to do together.

That means...each of us needs to be fully devoted to prayer. Committing to pray is not enough! Prioritizing prayer isn't enough! We actually need to come together and pray.

Commit to the **journey**. Set aside a few moments in your day, every day, to **spend** with **Jesus**. Don't get discouraged if you miss a day here or there. Pick it up again the next day.

Pray. Ask someone to hold you **accountable**; do it **together** with someone, do it around your "Table," in your small group, in your mentoring relationships, in your meetings, everywhere and in everything you do!

Get reacquainted with the **Prayer Room**; set up a prayer room/place in your home. Let's get serious about **prayer**. Let's get serious about praying for Covenant Church. Let's get serious about praying for transformed lives! Let's get serious about praying for the lost, for the harvest. Let's get serious about praying for God's Kingdom to come!

The early Church prayed. The Holy Spirit empowered their witness, transformed their lives and community, and enlarged God's kingdom. He can do it **again - here - now - but we need to **ask**.**