



The Place of Prayer in New Testament Churches

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When Jesus visited the Temple, recorded in Mark 11:17, He was appalled by the corruption He saw. The passage describes how in righteous indignation Jesus drove the money changers from the precincts declaring *"My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of thieves"* It was a reminder to all of the prophecy of which revealed the heart of God for all nations to be part of a 'joyful House of Prayer'. But just what kind of House of Prayer did God have in mind as He freely declares that Gentiles, eunuchs and all who love the Name of the Lord may enter in? Is this a place where prayer is offered like sacrifices in the temple - only open to a few on a 24/7 basis or does it speak rather of a new living relationship with God available to all believers wherever they are?

Last time I showed that the Bible reveals that Prayer was the normal experience of true Israelite believers who lived in the Old Covenant relationship with God as well as being the experience of all NT believers in Yeshua, the Saviour of Israel. I emphasised how important prayer was to the early church and to us. Many examples can be found in OT and NT writings of personal appeals to God. Many prayers focused on the attributes of God which thrilled the writer and yet at other times, the prayer flowed out of anguished hearts as they made strong appeals for God to intervene in humanly impossible situations.

Nevertheless, prayer was encouraged to ensure that each believer developed his personal relationship with God, rather than depending on an external priest/intercessor to do things on his behalf as they had done previously. So prayer was a normal part of Church life and was held in balance with other important aspects such as receiving the apostle's doctrine (teaching), fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Acts 2:42

IMPORTANT TO EARLY CHURCH

The Apostles considered prayer to be so important that "They gave themselves" to it but also to the Word of God – to ensure they heard the directing voice of God Acts 6:4. They prayed before "Laying on" hands and before acts of commissioning Acts 13:1-3. On some occasions when they prayed, the place was shaken Acts 4:32. However, praying was part of the NT church activity and not the whole.

There was no indication of believers joining monasteries, convents or going to retreat centres. No separate Houses of Prayer, 24/7 prayer rooms or joining in Prophetic Prayer Conferences. Prayer was part of the normal everyday experience of these pioneer believers as they explored the new-found freedom and joy in the Holy Spirit. They were taught the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread prayers and lived out the on a daily basis. (Further scriptures to study: Matt 18-19-20, Matt 6:5-15 1 Timothy 2:4, Acts 4:23-31

Today, according to Lance Lambert in his book "School of prayer" (Available from Amazon UK) "...Very few people

know how to pray together" Little time in the Church diary is devoted to it. And yet, Eph 6:10-18 says "...we wrestle not against flesh and blood but principalities and powers" which seems to suggest no 'short and sweet' prayer meeting. "Wrestling is not a nice gentle sport like tennis" says Lance. "It brings to mind sweat and blood and no gentlemanly behaviour" Maybe this is why it isn't so popular in western established Churches in other cultures and churches around the world, things are changing - sometimes for good but sometimes in an alarming fashion.

RISE OF PRAYER MINISTRIES

Since the Charismatic renewal of the 1960's and onwards, we have seen a rise in numerous 'para-church' prayer ministries. This can be a reflection on the revived interest created in the person and work of the Holy Spirit especially in equipping the saints for spiritual activity whether personally, corporately, nationally or internationally. Indeed Prayer for Israel is one such ministry that developed with a focus on the salvation of Israel and the development of Messianic congregations in the Land and not just the return of the Jews to the Land because the Church had lost the vision for and understanding of God's purposes for Israel. Intercessors for Britain also emerged in the same period to help focus Prayer for the UK Nation and Church and encourage saints in their own spiritual walk in local church life.

WHY DO WE PRAY?

There is no doubt that we need to be a people of Prayer and know how to stir one another up to pray. We pray

because there is a God who hears. We pray because we have a God who cares and we pray because only God can change things that (according to the way the Holy Spirit moves us) need changing. But the essential part of prayer is acknowledging who God is and that we are praying to a Holy God into whose presence we are privileged to enter. For all who truly believe, He has opened up a new and living way through the blood of His cross. What a joy to know that this is the inheritance of every believer whether Jew or Gentile!

However, there are some very real concerns about some prayer ministries that are likely to detach people from the guiding, guarding and modifying influence of the Body of Christ under the direction of the Spirit-anointed and complete Word of God. Are we surprised that this is the case? Are we shocked? We shouldn't be! Since this is all prophesied by the Lord Jesus Himself ^(Matt 24:5, 11-12, 24) and the apostles Paul, John and Peter ^(2 Thess 2, 1 Tim 4:1-5, 2 Tim 4:1-4, 1 Peter 21, John 4:1-3) and is a sure sign of the Last days before the Lord returns. So, let me focus on one particular group which may help you judge the rest, before you become involved.

HOUSE OF PRAYER

This ministry advertises itself in its title as being the genuine fulfilment of Isaiah 56 The movement goes back to 1982 and the Kansas City Metro City Fellowship pastored by Mike Bickle who started the International House of Prayer (IHOP) in 1989. Bickle became well known in the 80's for promoting a "new breed of prophets" that included Paul Cain, Bob Jones,

and others. Many question marks have been raised about this movement and especially among spirit-filled believers. I mention it mainly because they have a strong focus on Israel, seeking to establish exclusive Houses of Prayer not only within Messianic congregations but also in the UK and amongst other Western Nations Again, the reason to highlight it is not because we don't believe in prayer and Biblical prophecy but because we do.

REASONS FOR THE NEW INTEREST

There is much to thank God for in the Reformation. However, Protestant Evangelical spirituality has tended to develop mostly around the correct Bible teaching and expository preaching. It rejected Catholic mysticism, praying to Mary and the saints. It rejected monasticism. It rejected pilgrimages, self-abasements, acts of penance and self-loathing. But in so doing it created a tension between those who settled for knowing the scriptures in an intellectual way and those who desired to be more "spiritual", perhaps because they were more vocal ones, who desired to explore new ways to pray.

They were all taught "Forms of Prayer" but those who found it difficult to express their feelings were made to feel that they were unspiritual for not being fluent in prayer. IHOP and other movements seemed to have stepped into the gap created by a desire to know and relate to God and perhaps inadvertently created an elite grouping of new "gnostic mystics." But they run the huge risk of repeating history. Have we today, in Pentecostal

and Charismatic Churches, become so "free in the spirit", so looking for sensation and experience; that any mention of "guidelines" smacks of control, restriction, or "quenching the spirit" and therefore limiting what God can do or say among us.

TESTING THE SPIRITS

Reveals that we are in a battle – and it's a spiritual battle – not a cultural or a political one. So it is clear, we need to be a people of Prayer; we need to be "praying without ceasing" but we also need to pray aright using the God-given discernment that He provides. This is not intended to knock another movement that may involve many well-meaning believers. The role of Watchmen of the Walls is to look, assess and warn. That's not being negative or critical. It's called being loving and loving enough to tell the truth.

Eph 4:14-15

That's our prayer.

Derek Rous