

Prayer, Care, Share - Part 1

The Role of Prayer in Evangelism

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The year was 1857. The place was New York City. In the years previous, gold had been discovered in California. The railroad was now stretching from the east coast towards the west coast. The economy was thriving and the people of the United States had turned their hearts away from God and towards the riches of this world. In New York City many of the people with money moved out of the city to build homes in the outskirts. The city was now filled with the common people, the laborers who worked hard for minimum salaries.

In the midst of the masses of people, in New York City was the North Dutch Reformed Church of Manhattan. Many of the other churches had decided to follow their members and move outside of the city as well, but not this church. This church decided to remain in the center of the city and minister to the lost masses that now surrounded them. This decision was admirable but it was very difficult. The church struggled. Some even said that it should close. To accomplish their task they hired a 48 year old man by the name of Jeremiah Lanphier. He had chosen to leave his career as a businessman and focus on the ministry. He began to pray, visit homes, distribute Bibles and gospel tracts, and publicize church services. At one point an idea came to mind: to start a midday lunch prayer meeting at the church. He put up a sign that said, *"Prayer Meeting from 12 to 1 o'clock—Stop 5, 10, or 20 minutes, or the whole hour, as your time admits."* On September 23, 1857 the first prayer meeting was held. Lanphier climbed the stairs up to the third floor room in the church, laid down his Bible and pocket watch and waited. At 12:00 noon no one else arrived. At 12:10. . . no one. 12:20. . . no one. Finally at 12:30 Lanphier heard the creaking of the stairs, and one gentleman entered. By the end of their prayer time, the number had grown to six. That was only beginning. The next Wednesday, almost 20 people came. The third week, almost 40. They were so encouraged that they began to meet daily.

Then the economic crash of 1857 occurred. In New York City, 30,000 people lost their jobs. There was much talk of a possible civil war. The country still faced great disagreements over slavery. During this time of turmoil the prayer groups began to grow even more. One room full, then a second and then a third.

People were attending who were not yet believers, but convicted of their sin. The prayer meetings spread to other churches, theaters and even public buildings. According to some, within six months' time 10,000 people were praying daily, confessing their sins and pleading for God to send revival. The prayer meetings eventually spread to other cities like Cleveland, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Chicago and even Washington D.C.

Many churches began to have nightly worship services to lead people to Jesus Christ. At one period, 10,000 people a week in New York City were being converted. So many people needed to be baptized that churches would go to the frozen river and cut a hole in the ice to accommodate the need. It is estimated that from 1857-1859 around a million people in the United States started a new life in Christ.

Charles P. McIlvaine, a pastor in Ohio at this time, described what happened with these words, *"I rejoice in the decided conviction that this is the Lord's doing; unaccountable by any natural causes, entirely above and beyond what any human device or power could produce; an outpouring of the Spirit of God upon God's people, quickening them to greater earnestness in his service; and upon the unconverted, to make them new creatures in Christ Jesus."*

It began with God burdening one man to pray.

Can you imagine something like this happening in your home, your workplace or even this country? It is amazing to see God's use of prayer to bring about a spiritual awakening.

Who is one person that you wish with all your heart would become a follower of Jesus Christ? Are you praying for them? It may be your spouse, your boss, your neighbor or even your enemy. But are you praying for them?

When we look back through the life of Jesus Christ, the early church and even church history, the pattern is that God puts a burden in people's hearts to pray. They obey in prayer. Then God works.

Prayer has a special place in the heart of God, and prayer has a special role in the work of evangelism. Let us now consider the role of prayer in evangelism.

Drawing people to the love of Jesus Christ is a work of God the Father, from beginning to end, but at the same time we have been invited to take part in the process.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"
Matthew 28:19-20.

In Acts 1:8 you can see the balance when Jesus instructs his disciples with these words, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

We, the children of God, are to take our place as the bearers of light in the dark world around us (Matthew 5:14-16). We are to usher in the kingdom of God one moment, one conversation, one person at a time.

We have been invited to be ambassadors of Christ and carry the Good News of our King to a lost, needy, and unbelieving world. We see this described in 2 Corinthians 5:16, *“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”*

If we are to be Christ’s ambassadors where do we start? Prayer.

Why is prayer a necessary part of Evangelism?

Prayer is necessary because God tells us to pray. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4 we read, *“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*

We see prayer for evangelism in the Apostle Paul’s life as well. In Romans 10:1 it says, *“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”*

Prayer is necessary because man is fallen and cannot receive the knowledge of the truth without divine revelation. In Matthew 16 Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought Jesus was. Peter had responded, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Jesus then answered him, *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”*

Logic is not enough to understand and believe in Jesus Christ. It must be a revelation from God. Jesus tells us in John 6:44 that *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. In conversion it is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no hope at all”* (John 6:63).

1 Corinthians 2:11-15 summarizes this truth in these words: *“No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”*

Prayer is necessary because our own strategies, knowledge and winsome personality are not enough, i.e., without Christ we can do nothing. John 15:5 tells us, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”*

God alone can open one’s heart to the gospel. We see this truth at work in Acts 16:14, *“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”*

We are to pray, care for others with a God-honoring love, and share the truths of the gospel, but it is the Holy Spirit who draws one to Himself. The apostle Paul described this essential truth with these words in 1 Corinthians 3:7, *“So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”*

Prayer is necessary because our struggle is not against flesh and blood: *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”* (Ephesians 6:12). *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”* (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). *“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ”* (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Prayer is necessary for evangelism because by depending on God’s Holy Spirit in Evangelism we glorify God. As in the earlier quote by pastor Charles P. McIlvaine, *“I rejoice in the decided conviction that this is the Lord’s doing; unaccountable by any natural causes, entirely above and beyond what any human device or power could produce; an outpouring of the Spirit of God upon God’s people.”*

When we pray, God works, and there is no glory we can take. It is clearly a work of God and God alone.

Who can pray in regards to evangelism?

The obedient can pray and be heard for the sake of evangelism. 1 John 3:21-22 shows us clearly that obedience is a prerequisite to our prayers being heard. *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”*

One tells the story of recently being approached by a woman who was frustrated because God was not answering her prayers. The gentleman asked her if she was living an obedient life, and in response she just stood there in an awkward silence. She had never seen obedience as a prerequisite to God hearing one’s prayers.

Are our lives presently rightly related to God? Is our conscience condemning us, or are we walking rightly with God? It is not a question of perfection, but as far as we know is our heart submitted to God?

Below are listed other obstacles that might be obstructing our prayer life:

- **Deaf ear to God's Law** - *"If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination."* Proverbs 28:9
- **Unforgiveness** – Jesus says, *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."* Mark 11:25
- **Dishonoring your wives** – *"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."* 1 Peter 3:7
- **Cherished sin** – *"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."* Psalm 66:18
- **Unbelief** – *"For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord."* James 1:7
- **Unselfish and wrong motives** – *"You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."* James 4:2-3
- **Being uncompassionate** – *"Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor, will himself call out and not be answered."* Proverbs 21:13
- **Pride** – *"There they cry out, but he does not answer, because of the pride of evil men."* Job 35:12
- **Not knowing God's Word and not abiding in Christ** – *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* John 15:7

How can we pray in regards to evangelism?

In scripture we find many ways and descriptions of how to pray in regards to evangelism. As you seek to share your faith, look for the verses below that apply to your needs as you share Christ. Also, select the prayers from scripture that apply directly to the needs of the unbeliever with whom you wish to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are praying back to God the truths and prayers that He has already given to us.

1. Pray that God would work to change their hearts.

"And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh..." (Ezekiel 11:19)

2. Pray that God would put His Spirit within them.

"And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (Ezekiel 36:27)

3. Pray that they would come to Christ, and that the Father would draw them to His Son.

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6)

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” (John 6:44)

4. Pray God would open their hearts to hear and receive the message, just as He did with Lydia.

“The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14).

5. Pray that they would be rescued from the snare of the devil or from bondage.

“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.” (Romans 6:17)

6. Pray that God would remove Satan’s blinding influence.

“In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

7. Pray that God would grant them repentance.

“God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2 Timothy 2:25-26)

8. Pray that the Lord would send workers into the harvest field.

“And he said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” (Luke 10:2)

9. Pray that God would open a door for our message. (Colossians 4:3)

10. Pray that we would proclaim it clearly. (Colossians 4:4)

11. Pray that we would be wise in the way we act toward outsiders. (Colossians 4:5)

12. Pray that we would make the most of every opportunity. (Colossians 4:5)

13. Pray that our conversation would be filled with grace so that we may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:6)

14. Pray that words may be given us so that we will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel. (Ephesians 6:19)

15. Pray that the Holy Spirit would convict them in regard to sin, righteousness and judgment. (John 16:18)

16. Pray that we would not be ashamed to testify about our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:7)

17. Pray that God would draw the unbeliever to Himself. (John 6:44)

We must first pray that God will give each of us a heart that is broken, and burden for the lost people around us. Then we ask God to guide us to those in whose lives He is already working. We must then pray for God to guide our hearts as we prepare to share the gospel. We must also pray that God will prepare the heart of the unbeliever to receive the gospel.

May God work mightily in the world around us, but first let's pray.