

All Aspects Bathed in Prayer

If we want to see a God-empowered church planting movement initiated, it will require God's power. God acts in response to His people's prayers. We know for a certainty that God wills to save everyone (2 Peter 3:9). We know that He will build His church (Matthew 16:18). We know that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and will give us what we request (1 John 5:14-15). Therefore, we need to ask.

Prayer and Church Planting in Acts

We have clear examples in the book of Acts. Note how many significant events and aspects of church planting and church growth were surrounded by prayer in Acts.

Acts 1:24 praying before choosing leaders

Acts 4:31 (23-24a, 31-35) after persecution praying for boldness...great growth and maturity resulted.

Acts 6:6 (6-7) praying before choosing leaders...great growth resulted.

Acts 9:40 (40-42) praying for signs and wonders...resulting in great growth.

Acts 10-11 (Cornelius) prayer surrounded every aspect of the crossing over of the gospel to the Gentiles... a new people group.

Acts 12:12 praying for the release of Peter from prison.

Acts 13:1-3 praying before setting aside the first missions/church planting team, Paul and Silas.

Acts 14:23 praying before setting aside new believers in new churches as leaders.

Acts 16:25 praying in prison, resulting in conversion of jailer's household and their release.

Acts 20:36 praying when departing from a church he had planted, leaving them "on their own."

Acts 21:5 praying when commending Paul to a dangerous situation and certain imprisonment for the sake of the gospel.

Acts 22:17 praying in worship and receiving guidance as to future ministry plans.

Acts 28:8 praying for signs and wonders.

Prayer as Modeling Dependence

Prayer is an expression of our dependence upon the Lord. Prayer highlights the fact that the power and the victory are the Lord's. In John 14:13 it says, "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." Not only will a church planting movement glorify the Lord in that more people will acknowledge His lordship, but also because He will clearly be the source of such a movement.

Another practical reason to bathe all aspects of church planting in prayer is modeling. What people see in terms of church planting will affect how they view prayer, how they view "ministry" and how they will plant churches. Example is a powerful tool in shaping a church planting movement. Many of the dramatic movements in Latin America have been directly attributed to an emphasis on prayer. South Korean believers are renowned for their prayer and the amazing growth of the churches there over the last generation is a testimony to the power of the Lord working in response to His people's faith.

An Analogy

The Gulf War, often referred to as Operation Desert Storm, provides a metaphor for prayer. Prayer is to the work of evangelism and church planting as bombs were to the Gulf War. Several weeks of saturation bombing softened the targets within Iraqi held territory before any troops set foot in the country. In the same way, prayer can soften the hearts of people and prepare the way for a movement of the Spirit and for the work of believers who seek to win unbelievers over to the Kingdom of God. The Gulf War was not finally won merely through saturation bombing but by ground troops. They had to physically claim the territory which had been "prepared" through the bombing. Church planting movements require people to actually go and testify about the Lord, to evangelize and to do the work of church planting. Prayer, however, can prepare the way for such work. Prayer can provide the power.

Saturation bombing provides an analogy for a broad base of prayer, but there is also a major place for specific targeted prayer as well. This type of small scale prayer can be compared to the smart bombs used in the Gulf War. Both are precisely directed at a strategic place or situation. Such spiritual smart bombs, however, are not a recent development but have been in use for millenia!

Prayer Leading to a CPM in China

Following is a true story of how the Lord answered prayer in the beginnings of a church planting movement. Once there were two Christian young ladies in mainland China. They were single. They were completely untrained and uneducated, but the Lord called them in a dream to a remote part of the country to bear witness to His name. They had never left home before and certainly knew nothing about the area of which they had dreamed, but they obeyed. They went.

When they arrived, they didn't know what to do so they just started praying. That was OK for a while but soon they started to get hungry. They had no money and prayer doesn't fill the stomach. They started working, helping the local ladies with their laundry and taking care of their children. As they worked, they sang gospel songs. Soon the local people began to ask them about the songs they were singing. They shared their faith. People believed. Soon everyone in the village had heard so the two ladies moved on. After less than two years the ladies returned home. In twenty months they had started twenty-one new churches with nearly nine thousand people involved. They had to meet out in open fields because the groups were so large. After a couple of years the tares became evident as nearly half of the new converts had fallen away from the church. The remaining fruit, however, from these ladies' work still more than doubled the total Christian population for the entire province. God had moved.

If God can use poor, uneducated, untrained, naive, young women such as those two, He can use anyone. If God calls you to serve then do it. Find a way. If doors close then go through a window. All God requires is obedience and availability. You don't have to be big enough for the job. He is more than big enough for whatever task He has called you to. On the other hand, don't get a big head if the Lord gives you a measure of success in what He calls you to do. The fruit is because of Him, not because of you. Don Francisco sings a song about Balaam's donkey and it ends with these words: "So if the Lord starts using you, don't you pay it any mind. He could have used the dog next door if He'd been so inclined."

Prayer in Power Encounters

Prayer is a major weapon in spiritual warfare. This is clear from Ephesians 6:18. An example of that is what happened in confrontations with Qigong in China. Qigong is a traditional Chinese meditative practice. It has many forms, branches and applications but the type which is extremely popular in the part of China where I work involves very clear demon possession. In daily meditation the goal is to "lose control" of your body and become animated by a spirit which is one's "keeper." It is a practice which is accompanied by many miraculous signs including healings. The national leader of this movement is from Hubei and is named Zhang Zhi Xiang. He developed such a large and active following in our area that he established a training institute there and held the first international Qigong conference there. He trains the provincial and capital city government officials annually and trains the faculty at the provincial university annually. The university is a major center for its practice and promulgation.

We learned of Zhang's plans to come before he traveled to our area for the first time. We put out an urgent request to pray against this movement and called for a day of prayer and fasting at the particular time of his big rally in the capital. Christians locally and around the world began to pray specifically against the influence of Qigong.

As Zhang came there was a huge crime wave and great numbers of people were suffering from demon possession. Non-Christians were greatly afflicted and when their religious practitioners could not help them they decided, in desperation, to try asking Christians for help. There is a registered church in the

capital and its pastor was suddenly inundated with urgent requests from people to cast out demons. She had no idea how to help them.

When Zhang tried to have his meetings, however, he was completely stymied. He called up the deaf mute son of a government official in order to heal him publicly. Nothing happened. He had all the lights in the plaza where he was performing turned off so he could demonstrate how he can make his body glow. He was unable to do it. Time after time he failed in his attempts to perform signs and wonders.

The next day he began a tour through our province. He reached a certain county seat town and stopped for a scheduled meeting. The town leaders had inexplicably decided not to allow him to use the government building for his meeting. He was about to leave in frustration when a lower level government official was able to arrange for the use of the local school building. They arrived at the school building and Zhang remarked that he could sense spiritual opposition in the air. The government official climbed up on a little stepladder to hang the special lights in the room they were going to use as the "meditation hall" and inexplicably fell down dead! Zhang, frightened, cancelled the meeting and the rest of his tour.

The top Qigong leader in our province is a piano instructor at the university. She prepares students for an international piano competition in Hong Kong every year. In 1992 one of her students won the competition. The girl happened to be a Christian. When the press was interviewing the instructor afterwards she was telling them how her student's success was a result of Qigong charms and meditation. The student, though she greatly feared her instructor, contradicted her in front of the writers and television crews. She testified that she had consistently refused to wear the amulets or receive the blessings and that she never participated in Qigong meditation but that she was a Christian and her success was due to the blessing of the Lord. This was a major step that received much publicity and brought glory to the Lord's name.

Prayer in Personal Evangelism

The same thing can happen on an individual scale. In the end, spiritual warfare is not about territory but about people. It is about people's spiritual allegiance. It is a battle for their souls. Prayer is a great tool for personal evangelism not only through praying for people but also through praying with them. The lady who had been my language teacher was a tough nut to crack. I had witnessed to her many times. When I found out that I was going to be changing assignments and realized I would not see her again I began to earnestly pray for her salvation. I had one more trip planned to see her. When I arrived, to my surprise she was ready to believe.

In talking with her about it I discovered that prayer had been the major tool that God had used. I made it a habit, every time I visited her, to ask her if I could pray for her before I left. Naturally, to be polite, she always agreed. I would pray for her and her family and their salvation. She shared with me that as a result she had started to pray any time she felt helpless or out of control. Sometimes her seven-year-old daughter would see her praying and ask what she was doing.

About two weeks before I arrived on this final trip her family had participated in a lottery drawing to benefit the handicapped. As they were waiting for the drawing her daughter asked her if they could pray about the drawing. My teacher then prayed, "God, thank you that you have made us with whole and healthy bodies. Please use the money raised from this event to help those who are handicapped and less fortunate than we are. If you will it, then please let us win the lottery, but if not then let us just be happy to help the disadvantaged. Amen." They did not win the lottery but this made a deep impression on both my teacher and her daughter. As a result, when I visited she was ready to follow the Lord.

I spent eight hours going through salvation history with her in the presence of her husband. I praise the Lord for this opportunity because her husband is a committed Communist party member and is disdainful of any religion. It was mainly for his benefit that I was so thorough in my discussion. He did not become

a Christian but she accepted the Lord in his presence and now at least he is fully aware of what she believes and why. I believe her daughter will also believe soon. I was able to get her immediately involved in a good house church and she was eager to try to get a new one started at the university where she lives as well. We got well on the way to forming it during my visit. The bottom line is that prayer can be used as a teaching and a witnessing tool besides bringing the power of heaven to bear on the situation so do not neglect to pray with those to whom you are witnessing whenever possible.

Another similar example occurred with a tour guide. When I first set foot in our area of service one of the first things I did was take a three-day tour of the province. The tour guide ended up being someone with whom I kept in contact. I frequently witnessed to her and tried to visit her as I had opportunity but she showed absolutely no interest at all in the gospel. When I found out that I was going to be changing assignments and realized I would not see her again I began to earnestly pray for her salvation. I had one more trip planned to see her. When I arrived, to my surprise she was ready to believe. This was nothing else but the work of the Holy Spirit and the answering of fervent prayer.

This lady was just incredibly worldly and completely consumed with materialism and what the world might call benign hedonism. When I made an appointment to visit with her over dinner, in the middle of it her boyfriend arrived unexpectedly and she received a call on her cellular phone asking her to attend a wild birthday bash for a close friend in a strip tease bar. That was pretty much a typical evening for her. I then told her the reason I wanted to talk with her, rescheduled for the next evening and prayed for there to be no interruptions. (I also asked her to turn off her beeper and cellular phone of course!)

The next evening we met. I have never encountered anyone who was so ready to become a believer. I kept explaining again the meaning and demands of discipleship because I thought she was accepting everything too readily. But she was really that eager! Not only that, but she told me that her boyfriend and her sister, both of whom I knew, had told her that if she ever became a Christian that they also wanted to! I cannot emphasize to you enough how much these three individuals were three of the last you would expect would become Christians. This was very much a matter of "tax-gatherers and sinners" type of people.... so I guess maybe it wasn't so surprising after all. That is who the Lord came to seek and to save and He certainly did it.

As if that wasn't enough, she was worried about being able to squeeze time into her busy work schedule to attend church because she lives outside of town and transportation is time-consuming. It just so happens that the newest house church in the city had just been started in her very apartment complex. It was a two-minute walk away! I believe fervent prayer is about the only way I could even hope to have an impact in her life. I had sometimes prayed with her in her presence when she was going through difficulties and had told her that I was praying regularly for her. Those prayers eventually got through. We need to go beyond praying for the lost, but do not neglect prayer!

Prayer for God's Glory

God is concerned for His name's sake. Prayer for His name to be lifted up, magnified and glorified is a pretty safe prayer. I believe that if we look for ways in which the Lord's name is being reproached and pray against those situations that the Lord will act in mighty ways to protect His name. Consider this as a prayer strategy. Following is a story which illustrates this principle.

There was a man in a village in our province who was a demon worshipper. He became a believer and was immediately tormented by the demons he had previously worshipped. He constantly saw visions of them coming to eat his internal organs. It drove him out of his mind and he would spend all day every day in his house throwing stones at the demons. After some period of time this ended up totally destroying the ceiling and roof of his house. He then lived in the middle of those four walls, naked, unable to talk, out of his mind and dependent on his fellow villagers taking food by for him to eat. They would set a bowl of rice inside the door while he slept.

Later when an evangelist came to the village the people flatly refused the gospel, saying the man's situation proved the superior strength of the demons in comparison with the Christian God. They claimed that if the man were healed then they would believe.

When this became known I immediately made it an issue for prayer internationally. Fervent prayer went up for the man all over the globe. Two months later an evangelist went back and the man was healed. His sanity was restored and he was clothed. He rebuilt his roof. Many villagers became Christians. They formed a church which actually met in the man's house. They soon planted another church in a nearby village. God's name was honored. He was glorified and His Kingdom was built.

Another instance of God acting for His glory occurred in relation to the medical community. We had two nurses serving as short-term workers on our team. They were also teaching English. One of their students was the number three pianist in all of China. She was very close to making a decision for Christ when suddenly one day she was in an awful car collision and was in a deep coma. All her local friends deserted her and her boyfriend stole all her money and belongings. The hospital even refused to treat her in the emergency room because she had no money. Fortunately our nurses were able to arrange for payment. The doctors examined her and declared her to be hopelessly injured. They said she would be a virtual vegetable if she survived. They said she would probably never come out of the coma and if she did it wouldn't make much difference because of brain damage. She would certainly never walk or be able to play the piano at all.

Our nurses and other personnel would go to the hospital and pray over her, read the Bible to her and take care of her medical needs. The hospital personnel just put her on an I.V. drip and left her. Our people would turn her in the bed, do physical therapy every couple of hours and keep her clean. They contacted her relatives in another province to come and help care for her. Her two sisters who came received a tremendous and life-changing witness due to the prayers, Bible reading and physical care they witnessed from our personnel.

After a time, money ran out and the hospital sent her home to die. The two sisters took her to their province and waited for the end. Finally, when they were just about to just let her starve to death, they decided in desperation to try one more thing. They carried her limp body to the piano and sat her down on the bench, putting her hands on the keys. Suddenly she came out of the coma! Within two days she could even walk. Within a week she was nearly fully recovered.

She and her family are all aware that it was the prayers and care of Christians which brought this lady through. She returned to our province and bore testimony of God's grace to her.

Prayer for Christian Workers

A more minor issue, but one closer to home, is prayer for those who are doing the work. You will suffer inconvenience, illness, and loss as a result of your obedience in ministry. God is concerned as much with what He does in us as with what He does through us. God has not only promised that He is about redeeming the nations but also about redeeming us (Philippians 1:6). God will accomplish His purpose in us and through us through our suffering. John Piper reminds us that, "Loss and suffering, joyfully accepted for the kingdom of God, show the supremacy of God's worth more clearly in the world than all worship and prayer." Prayer, however, can strengthen us for responding in joy to this suffering.

For a period of time our family was undergoing major demonic attacks. Our two-year-old son was suddenly having trouble falling down. He had learned to walk at seven months and now was having trouble. I followed him around for a while and observed him. When he fell it was always just as if someone was holding his foot to the ground when he was trying to take a step. When I asked him what had happened that is exactly what he told me, "Daddy, someone was holding my foot down." It happened several times near broken glass or stairs. Fortunately he was never seriously hurt.

Then I went out for a run. It was an out-and-back course and I had just made the turn when I noticed a jeep driving toward me down the dirt road I was on. The driver was honking and flashing his lights. I thought he wanted me to get off the road so I started running on the shoulder. Suddenly something told me to turn around. As I did I saw a German Shepherd launching himself at my throat. He was a trained military attack dog which had suddenly gone berserk and escaped from his trainer. He was attacking silently just as he had been trained. I had no time to react or defend myself but suddenly the dog crumpled in mid-air just as if he had hit a glass wall. He fell to the ground dazed and confused. I turned to defend myself and his trainer appeared down the road, calling him.

My wife then began to have back problems which would normally only be caused from some sort of trauma despite having quite a calm time in terms of back stress. This ended up causing virtual paralysis and requiring major surgery. Our lives were turned upside down as she became totally bedridden and I had to do all the housework, care for our son, and even carry her to the restroom. Our neighbors watched us closely throughout this tremendous ordeal. Not only did the Lord work in us by breaking my spirit of pride and independence, but He also used this to create a strong relational bond between us and our neighbors as I became more and more dependent upon them. This resulted in the eventual salvation of some of them. God was merciful and healed my wife in answer to prayer, and the benefits the Lord worked through the difficulty stayed on in our lives and the lives of many others.

Prayer for Strength in Weakness

In Gethsemane Jesus asked His disciples to pray for strength to withstand temptation and opposition. They didn't pray, and they fled. Before His ascension He told them to pray. They did and were filled with the Holy Spirit and with courage to suffer and the power to turn the world upside down. In nearly every instance in Acts when Luke notes that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, an accompanying sign was boldness in witness, whatever the cost. For example, after their release by the authorities in Acts 4:23-33,

And when they had been released, they went to their own {companions,} and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard {this,} they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy Spirit, {through} the mouth of our father David Thy servant, didst say, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ.' For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and {began} to speak the word of God with boldness. And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one {of them} claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

Clearly prayer was a major factor in the amazing expansion of the early church even in the face of opposition and persecution.

This brings me to my final point. God's answers to our prayers may not be what we expect. His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). God frequently chooses to work through weakness in order to show His power. Even Christ did not come as a conquering hero but as a dying servant (Philippians 2:5-8). Passages such as Matthew 10:16-39, much of 1 Corinthians 1-4 (e.g. 1:18-2:10, 3:18-21a; 4:8-16) and the book of 1 Peter remind us that we will often achieve victory through suffering defeat and achieve

greatness through humiliation. Prayer is the ultimate expression of this lifestyle of weak dependence by which we conquer kingdoms. It is spiritual seed, an expression of our very lives. Jesus reminds us in John 12:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Clearly prayer is an essential aspect of any church planting movement.