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## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GROUP PRAYER?

By Dean Merrill (deanmerrill@adelphia.net)

Everybody's in favor of prayer, to be sure. It's as revered as motherhood, apple pie, and the flag. At least that's what we all say. "Be in prayer about such-and-such," the pastor urges from the pulpit. In the foyer afterward, one woman says to a friend facing medical tests, "I'll sure pray with you about that."

But a question lingers: How much prayer is actually happening? When all is said and done on this topic, is more being said than getting done?

A certain format of prayer seems in serious decline these days—group prayer. I don't mean where 300 people stand reverently listening while one eloquent spokesperson with a microphone addresses God for four minutes. Nor do I mean the contemporary prayer circle of eight or ten, where each takes a turn expressing well-crafted sentences to the Lord.

I'm talking about the entire congregation "going vertical," disregarding their neighbors to the left and right in order to lift up their hearts and minds simultaneously to the Lord above. You know—the kind of thing many of us used to do at the close of every Sunday night service, before we got too sophisticated or inventive or postmodern for such activity.

Please understand: I'm not trying to defend a "good old days" tradition. Times and formats change constantly, and nothing can stop that. I have no appetite for the Sunday-night-church debate that has rumbled over the past decade or two. That's not my crusade.

I just want a conducive time and place *somewhere in the week* for group conversation with God that is open-ended and relatively unstructured. A time for "waiting

upon the Lord." A time to dial down the inner pace and hear the voice of God. A time to respond to what He's saying to me.

I cannot escape the conviction that God intends for prayer to be central, not peripheral, to the life of His people on earth. If we want to adjust the times and formats, fine. But let's not just drop out. More than a few churches these days are in danger of letting prayer slide into being the *specialty ministry* of a few, like those who play the drums or create nice artwork—something for "the prayer warriors," you know. We're forgetting that Paul wrote, "I want men *everywhere* to lift up holy hands in prayer" (1 Tim. 2:8). He told us to "pray in the Spirit on *all* occasions with *all* kinds of prayers and requests" (Eph. 6:18). When group prayer shrinks down to just a half-dozen hardy souls huddling at an odd hour in a back room somewhere, we can hardly keep calling ourselves New Testament churches.

Yes, I've been through a lot of "altar times" in my past that were wearisome, even eccentric. I've suffered through as many manipulative preachers and evangelists as you have who tried to crank up a response. (You always knew they were truly desperate when they resorted to the threadbare tactic of "Let's have all the young people come forward! We need to gather around and pray for them in this midst of the temptations they face!" The poor teenagers didn't dare refuse, and the preacher got the head count he wanted.)

On the other hand, how many of us were genuinely filled with the Holy Spirit, or called into the ministry, at an evening altar? I assume we want these kinds of God-encounters to continue today. Do we

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have better ideas on how to facilitate them? If so, let's put them into action.

To engage—or re-engage—today's Christians in group prayer, we will have to take at least three steps:

### **Teach clearly why we do this.**

It's not just to perpetuate a Pentecostal tradition. This goes all the way back to Old Testament times (see 2 Chron. 20:18-19; Neh. 8:5-6). We pattern ourselves after the apostolic believers, who "raised their voices together in prayer to God" (Acts 4:24). We're also getting ready to join "the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God . . .'" (Rev. 19:1).

To those who find this odd or distracting, I simply say, "Think about going into any restaurant today and sitting down with your friends for a meal. Fifty different conversations are going on simultaneously, right? Everybody's talking at once . . . and nobody's cavesdropping on anybody else. That, in fact, would be rude. Everyone is caught up in their own personal dialogue. So it is when we pray together as a group. I talk to God, and you talk to God 'in the next booth,' so to speak. The overall atmosphere encourages conversation and friendship."

**Preach to the heart as well as the mind.** Information in a message is important, but it's not the whole task. Real preaching moves the heart and will to reach out to God, to embrace more of His essence. If not, there's little to pray about when the preacher finishes.

**Loosen up the schedule.** This kind of open-ended conversation with God is simply not going to happen if people know that the sanctuary has to be cleared for the next service in 15 minutes. If anything is scheduled too tightly

to follow—another service, a class, a fellowship hour, even midday—lunch human nature is such that it simply won't concentrate on seeking the Lord. The mind will inevitably be thinking about the clock.

This is why Jim Cymbala, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle (with whom I co-authored the *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* trilogy of books), refuses to slot Sunday services at less than three-hour intervals. While in the old, smaller building on Flatbush Avenue, the four services began at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and 6 p.m. Now in the bigger facility on Smith Street, the schedule is 9 a.m., noon, and 4 p.m. He simply will not pinch the time for response at the end of the meeting.

This, incidentally, is what lays the groundwork for the Tabernacle's famous Tuesday night prayer meeting, attended by thousands. It's not an isolated phenomenon. It grows out of the hunger for group prayer cultivated on Sundays.

Not every church across the continent should do it Brooklyn's way, to be sure. But let us ask ourselves: How and when *shall* we call upon the Lord together? It's a vital part of Christian discipleship.

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