



The Death of Prayer Meetings

Mark Jones

People do what they want to do. Regrettably, when it comes to Christians, they seem to not want to pray together at prayer meetings.

As a pastor, I'm concerned how many Christians have such energy for the things of the world – we will drive across town for our kids to get to piano lessons or take them to a sports practice – but we seem to have very little energy for the things of God. Each day we must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Christ (Luke 9:23). Each day we must seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). But why is it that once a month or once a week we find it so difficult to meet together to pray corporately? For all the gospel-centered talk about this and that, as well as the many books that are “gospel-centered,” why has corporate prayer fallen on hard times (even harder times than the evening service)? What are we doing that is more important than praying together?

The Scriptures seem to me to be very clear on the nature and necessity of corporate prayer meetings:

“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14).

“When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying” (Acts 12:12).

Church history also gives us many good examples (e.g., Calvin in Geneva). So why are corporate prayer meetings so pitifully attended or not even offered by churches today?

There are probably a number of reasons, such as:

1. The pastor doesn't see the importance of corporate prayer. (Personally, I think a pastor should be at the corporate prayer meeting even if it is just he and his family).
2. The meetings invariably turn into an “organ donation” gathering (e.g., my aunt is going in to hospital for an ingrown toenail).
3. There isn't a whole lot of fervent, biblical prayer going on. (The elders must fix that problem through teaching and example).
4. People are too busy. (Remember, people do what they want to do, and usually always find time and a way to do it).
5. People are functional hyper-Calvinists. (They don't really understand that the God who ordained the ends has also ordained the means to accomplish those ends. Prayer is one of those means: if we do not ask, we will not receive).

But here's my own personal view on why corporate prayer meetings are as popular as hot dogs in a synagogue:

People have not known the holiness and goodness of God in personal prayer. Perhaps they haven't asked enough of God and thus received the answers he is so willing to give (Matthew 7:7-8, 11:24, 21:22)? They haven't personally grasped the value of prayer and how important it is for our souls. Thus they are decidedly unmoved to want to meet for corporate prayer because the problem begins in private. Perhaps there is a correlation between private laziness and public laziness in the church today? But corporate prayer will help our private prayer and vice versa. We need both because the Christian life involves both (Matthew 6:4-6, Acts 12:12). And I think pastors who don't meet to pray with their people need to have a compelling

reason why they don't.

The person who has met with God, their Father, in private prayer, should also desire to meet with God "our Father" among their brothers and sisters. After all, the church is a body (i.e., a family), which thrives in unity and in numbers (Matthew 18:20, Acts 1:14).

Now, there is a current type of Christian theology making the rounds that argues you should not do something unless your heart is right. These people argue: if you do something, but you don't want to do it, you are acting hypocritically. You should, in their mind, get your heart right first.

God forbid that his people apply this thinking to prayer (or any other Christian duty).

Echoing a well-known Puritan, there are times in my life when I'd rather die than pray. Often I don't feel like praying privately, and sometimes I don't feel like praying corporately. But it is a Christian duty. And often, in his grace, God turns my duties into delights (or partial delights) – but not always, which does not negate my duty.

Most days I don't feel like going for a run, but almost always feel better after the initial ten minutes of warming up, and even better when the run is finished. Prayer can be like that. Whatever the case, I need to pray, and I also need to pray with others and for others (note the "us" not "me" in the Lord's prayer).

I need to hear the young (covenant) children in my church call upon God as their Father; I need to hear the widowed old lady speak before the King of Kings; I need to hear fathers pleading with God to make us better leaders in the home; I need to see my fellow elders leading by example in how and what to pray; and I need to be there as an example myself (1 Peter 5:1-3). The blessings I've received from others at prayer meetings have been incalculable.

But there's something much more important than the blessing I receive: there's the

advancement of Christ's kingdom and glory when his saints gather together and call upon the name of the Lord (i.e., the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer). And for that reason we ought to always be praying together (Acts 2:42).

Satan hates private prayer. But I suspect he hates even more corporate prayer. It seems he might be winning many battles in the church today that he has no business winning. One of those is keeping the godly from praying with each other.

Life is just a little too easy for us, so the need to pray is not as pressing as it might be for Christians in countries or eras when times were more difficult. It is amazing how much energy is spent posting on Facebook about a certain social crisis, but how little effort is spent praying together about that specific social crisis (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, etc.).

How sad that God wants to bless us, but we act as though we do not need to be blessed. God and Christ are willing to open the floodgates of heaven to a praying people, but we must ask or we will not receive. But, even more importantly, should we not, as the body of Christ, be asking for the Head to receive his glory, power, and dominion?

John Owen said, "A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more."

But, we could add: "A church may be filled, but what that church is on their knees together before God, that they are and no more."



Rev Dr Mark Jones is Senior Minister at Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Vancouver, Canada