

All God's People Want to Pray

A Pilgrimage of Prayer

It wasn't a matter of making them pray or praying for them, it was all about letting them pray.

My pilgrimage of prayer began when my father was saved and delivered from alcohol addiction while I was still a baby. From then on, he loved God and believed in prayer. Our family prayed before every meal and had family devotions at bedtime.

Dad also believed in going to church - a lot. Worship services, prayer meetings, visitation, mission groups: it didn't matter. If the door was unlocked at the church, we were there. In this conservative Protestant church where I literally grew up, prayer was predictable.

- Laymen led prayers at certain points during worship services.
- All meetings began and concluded with a prayer.
- The pastor led a pastoral prayer during the Sunday morning and evening service in which he prayed for the big stuff like church members in the hospital and world problems. On occasion, he would pray for missionaries, which usually meant we were about to take up a special offering.
- On Wednesday evening there was a prayer meeting. The first half of this

service consisted of two hymns, a lengthy discussion of the sick whose names were printed on colored paper, and a brief time of prayer in which the pastor called on three or four laymen to pray out loud. The rest of the hour was devoted to a Bible study.

Until my high school years, I had no reason to think there was any other way to do prayer in the church. Then some Pentecostal and later Catholic friends invited me to go to church with them. My prayer horizons broadened.

My first out-of-comfort-zone prayer experience came when a Pentecostal church invited the youth quartet I was in to sing.

Now those folks knew how to make a quartet stand up and *sang*. I had a great time, but the most amazing thing to me was their prayer time. The band kept right on playing and when the preacher said, "Let's pray." everybody did, out loud and at the same time. Then a man started praying really loud in words that sounded foreign.

After he finished, the preacher prayed the interpretation, which was just as fascinating to me as the speaking in tongues. Needless to say, I

had a hard time keeping my eyes closed during that prayer time.

Later, I was invited to attend mass in a Roman Catholic Church. It was the other end of the spectrum from the Pentecostal service. I was impressed with their reverence for Jesus, but thought the service was ritualistic and spiritually dead. Of course, it was dead to me because I had no idea what the rituals meant.

One thing in particular about the Catholic service that offended my evangelical upbringing was the reading of prayers from the little prayer books that resided next to the little hymnals in the pew racks.

These experiences convinced me that, though I was satisfied with the denomination of my parents, there was a lot more to prayer than what I'd been experiencing in my home church.

About that time, I came in contact with the book by Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer, Conversing with God*. As I remember it, our youth leader introduced us to this form of conversational group prayer during our weekly Bible study.

Rinker's book gives several guidelines for conversational small group prayer. Generally, the group members pray multiple short prayers about one topic at a time rather than long monologue prayers. (This form of prayer was discussed under the heading Topical Praying in chapter 12.)

This was prayer that seemed real to me. It gave God the opportunity to really move in our midst and the youth group experienced revival. A number of kids were saved and several of us surrendered to the ministry.

I started college on fire for God and excited to be right in the middle of His plan for my life. Little did I know that the devil had a plan too. During my freshman year, I had a traumatic experience involving moral failure by a minister whom my family had admired and trusted. There's no purpose in elaborating the details, but it left a secret root of bitterness in me that began eating away my spirit like a hidden cancer. The first thing to die was my prayer life. I kept up the appearance of a super-Christian, but inside, my faith was evaporating.

I married my best friend, led a successful youth ministry in a large church, finished my undergraduate degree and was half way through seminary before I hit bottom. One afternoon, sitting in the car on a Dairy Queen parking lot, I admitted to my wife that I no longer believed in God. I was walking the walk and talking the talk, but had gradually become a closet agnostic. I could say a public prayer as fine as anyone even though I hadn't talked to God in years.

I left the ministry and went to work in construction. As I continued to sink into bitterness, I came to the point of literally hating God. One Sunday I agreed to attend worship with my wife and had to literally sit on my hands during the sermon to control my anger. I wanted to jump up and yell at the preacher that everything he was saying was a lie.

Three things protected and sustained me during the spiritual darkness that engulfed me for the next few years:

- The consistent Christian walk of my wife and family.
- The patient grace of God.
- The constant prayers of everyone who loved me.

I had no joy during that period of my life even though I would never have admitted it. I couldn't smile, even when I tried. In the end, it was the longing for the genuineness and truth of my earlier relationship with the Lord that brought me back to my knees.

One afternoon, alone at home, I got on my knees and prayed this simple prayer, "Dear God, I don't know for sure if you exist, but if you do, I'm sorry for the things I've said and done against you. I still have a lot of questions and some day I wish you would answer them, but if you don't, I'll accept that because I'm ready to let you be God in my life again."

That was it. No flashes of lightning or exhilarating emotion. Just a quiet renewal in my spirit as I re-established my conversational relationship with God by confessing my sin and submitting my will to His.

I came out of that experience with a commitment to authentic prayer. However, years later, during preparation for a sermon on the cleansing of the temple, I became convicted by Jesus' words:

...It is written, 'My house is a house of prayer,'...
Luke 19:46 (NKJV)

Our church was active and happy, but no one was walking out of our worship services saying, "Wow, that's a house of prayer."

As I pleaded with the Lord for direction, He convicted me about my attitudes toward those Pentecostal and Catholic services I'd attended as a teenager. He pressed on my heart that He liked the congregational prayer they were doing a whole lot more than the nothing we were doing.

We had prayers during our worship services as much as other churches, but He was convicting me about leading my whole congregation to pray, not just the folks that prayed publicly and came to prayer meetings. I remembered the wonderful conversational prayer I'd experienced as a teen, but couldn't see how to apply it to a congregation.

I tried everything I could think of. I built prayer benches at the front of the auditorium, preached a series of sermons on prayer, and expanded our prayer ministry, but nothing changed. The pew sitters were still sitting right where they always had, doing just what they had always done: watching and listening.

About that time, the church graciously gave me a two-month sabbatical. I traveled the country attending great churches. One of my goals was to see how these famous congregations prayed. I was disappointed. They had wonderful worship and great preaching, but no congregational prayer. Don't misunderstand; these were great praying churches with hundreds of people involved in their prayer ministries. However, the people in the pew were not being led to pray any more than the folks in my church.

God was breaking my heart for His people. I'd been their pastor for ten years, long enough to

know that the majority of them didn't have an adequate prayer life. I had to find a way to help them all encounter God through prayer.

The light began to come on when the Heavenly Father finally got a simple truth through to me.

God's people want to pray.

At first, I was really confused by this revelation because I'd been struggling to get folks to pray. It was like pulling teeth. They wanted to do everything but pray. What was God saying?

Here's what the Lord explained to me. Followers of Christ want to talk to their Heavenly Father, but most of them are afraid to speak in public and they all hate being bored. Now I saw the problem. Most public prayer boils down to those two things, one person making a spiritual speech, while everyone else is bored.

When I started looking out across my congregation with the assurance that almost everyone there had come into the room with a desire to talk with the Lord, I began to see our prayer time in a whole different light.

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As I began trying to apply this principle, I quickly realized that my Sunday morning pastoral prayer was a hindrance to congregational prayer because the congregation wasn't praying with me. I tried lots of things, but didn't feel like we were making much headway until one Sunday morning when I made a surprising discovery.

I realized that I'd been having an effective congregational prayer time for years without even realizing it. It was what we called the *invitation* at the conclusion of the service.

After my sermon, with music playing softly, I would have the congregation bow, then guide them through a time of reflection. Just before I presented the altar call, I would guide them through a prayer of repentance and surrender to

the will of Christ. I led this prayer similar to what I now call prayer by suggestion.

Applying these same techniques to the pastoral prayer eventually produced the techniques detailed in Part 3 of this book. It also began a new chapter in my pulpit ministry and the prayer life of our congregation. It was a dream come true, a passion fulfilled.

I'll never forget the Sunday one of the young fathers stopped as he shook my hand on his way out of the sanctuary. "I don't listen to your pastoral prayer anymore." He had my full attention as he continued, "You get me started talking to the Lord and I just don't hear anything else you say."

I said, "Hallelujah!"

The next step of my pilgrimage came years later, after I'd left the pastorate and begun my writing career. I was two months into a rural interim pastorate when the chairman of the deacons stopped me and said, "The way you do the pastoral prayer, I like it. That's the way it ought to be done."

I love men like that. He had encountered something new, given it prayerful consideration, and made a decision.

I thanked him for his kindness, but his words reverberated in my spirit for days. I knew that the way I led prayer was good for folks and pleasing to God, but this rural deacon had said, "That's the way it *ought* to be done." I didn't realize it until later, but my pilgrimage had become a crusade for the revival of congregational prayer.

STUDY GUIDE:

1. The followers of Christ want to talk to their Heavenly Father, but most of them are afraid to _____ and they all hate being _____.

Discussion question: For every hour of worship in your church, how much time do you estimate the average person actually prays during the service? How much time do you think it should be? Why?