

Teaching for 1-23-08

True Devotion to Prayer

Many of us are familiar with the words of Jesus as He cleansed the Temple and quoted from the Prophet Isaiah: *My house will be a house of prayer.* (Is. 56:7). It is not uncommon to hear many today quoting those same words about the church being a house of prayer. Yet a closer examination of the priority of prayer in most churches indicates that the status quo of prayer has remained largely unchanged. A declaration of being a “house of prayer” doesn’t necessarily make it so!

Having said that, there is a growing movement of prayer across our country and around the world. This week America’s National Prayer Committee, meeting in Miami, Florida, will celebrate 25 years as a loosely knit organization of prayer ministries from across the country. It is a celebration because many in the prayer movement have witnessed a growing desire for the priority of prayer in many venues.

Books on prayer, once a rarity in Christian bookstores, now take up whole sections. Conferences on prayer and national calls for fasting and prayer are increasing exponentially. In the last ten years *Pray! Magazine*—a magazine devoted entirely to prayer—has experienced a growing circulation when many magazines are in decline. These are encouraging signs that Jesus’ words are becoming the heart-cry of many believers today.

Prayer-Health

But what does this mean for the life of prayer in the local church? How do you know if your church is moving closer to the standard of being a house of prayer? Is there some way that we can gauge the “prayer-health” of our churches?

We can rejoice that there has been great progress in seeing prayer acknowledged in many more churches. But much of the time prayer is viewed as one of many programs that must be maintained in the church. Prayer is acknowledged as necessary, but is often relegated to a small group of intercessors. Or prayer might be highlighted in an occasional special emphasis—such as a prayer week or a 24-hour prayer vigil. But most do not know how to sustain fervor in prayer that continually builds churches into true houses of prayer.

A Biblical Standard

Is there a standard in the New Testament by which we can gauge the “prayer-health” of our churches? A study of the word “devoted” can help establish this standard. In Colossians 4:2 Paul writes: *Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart* (NLT).

The word translated *devoted* is also used in Acts 1:14 to describe the disciples who, following the instructions of Jesus before His ascension, were “constantly united in prayer.” This same word describes the lifestyle of the early church as portrayed in Acts 2:42: *They joined with other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord’s Supper and in prayer.*

In Acts 6:4 the apostles make clear that their ministry priorities were to *give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word* (NKJV). It is also used in Paul's admonition in Romans 12:12 to *continue steadfastly in prayer* (NKJV). The word used in the Greek in each of these verses has the idea **“to persevere, to be constantly diligent, to adhere closely to, to be marked by careful, unrelenting attention, and persistent application.”**

New Thinking Required

This is the standard set by the Lord Himself in His Word. When people become aware of this teaching, the common reaction is to realize how far short their own lives and churches fall of the standard that God has set for His people. Granted, it is a very high standard. But nothing less could be expected from our Lord Jesus, Who is the ultimate example of a life devoted to prayer.

This definition of being *devoted* to prayer militates against any casual attitude toward prayer in the church. And because these passages are corporate in their application, prayer of this caliber cannot be relegated to just a select few. Words such as *persevere, constantly diligent, unrelenting* and *persistent* all challenge us to think of prayer as more than just another of the many programs in the church. In fact, not even evangelism is spoken of in the same terms in the New Testament. This language challenges us to see prayer in a whole different light.

Thinking of prayer in new terms demands that we be willing to shake off old ways of perceiving prayer. What would it mean for your church to think of prayer as a *culture to be fostered* rather than a *program to be implemented*? Prayer Transformation Ministries speaks of this as developing a “culture of prayer.”

What would a culture of prayer look like in your church? How do we begin to speak and act in terms of culture instead of programs? All of these questions need to be addressed in our own lives first—and then in the corporate context as a church body. Ultimately we cannot come to the place of being “devoted to prayer” unless we understand prayer as the fruit of a dynamic, personal and growing relationship with Jesus Christ. The early disciples could be “devoted to prayer” because they were absolutely convinced that the Living Lord Jesus Christ was in their midst as He had promised in Matthew 18:20. Jesus was not a vague theological concept to them. He was the living and present Lord Jesus.

Being devoted to prayer is not a luxury; it is the standard that God has set for His Church. In these defining days, it is imperative that we as God's people become all that He desires us to be as a people of prayer and a *house of prayer for all nations*. The fate of the world literally depends on us.