

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Christy, Jennifer Hale (2010) "Transformed by Prayer," *Leaven*: Vol. 18: Iss. 4, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss4/6>

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Transformed by Prayer

JENNIFER HALE CHRISTY

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and *the prayers*. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴*All who believed were together and had all things in common;* ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, *as they spent much time together* in the temple, *they broke bread at home* and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.* (Acts 2.42–47)

What were they doing? They believed. They were together. They had all things in common. They spent time together. They ate together. And God brought more people to himself, through them!

BLUEPRINT

Among Churches of Christ, we often look to these few verses in Acts as a blueprint for how our churches should behave. We want to not only be a “back to the Bible” or *sola scriptura* church, we want to be the Acts 2.42 church. We meet together every Sunday. We believe. We share with one another. We share in communion every week (not to mention frequent potluck meals!). Why isn't God—on a daily basis—adding to our number those who are being saved? What are we missing? Do we need to meet more often? Do we need to “have all things in common”? Where is the disconnect? Let's back up and see what the early followers were up to *before* Pentecost.

PRE-PENTECOST

The book of Acts opens with the risen Lord appearing to the disciples. On the Mount of Olives, just before his ascension, Jesus tells the disciples not to leave Jerusalem. We're told that *they prayed* constantly—not just the Twelve, but also some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus' brothers.

At some point, the crowd of believers grows to about 120. Peter addresses this crowd and says that they have to choose a new disciple to replace Judas. Luke gives us the requirements for this new disciple: it must be a man, and he must have been with them while they were following Jesus (from the baptism to the ascension). So they propose two men: Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. *They prayed*. Asking God to reveal who should take Judas' place, they cast lots. The lot fell to Matthias, so he was chosen to join the eleven.

They outlined the basic requirements, identified candidates, prayed and cast lots. Before this time, Jesus had been the only one to select the Twelve. (It is worth mentioning that Jesus spent ample time in prayer before selecting and calling the Twelve.) This account provides us with the first and only example of how

the early followers selected one of the twelve disciples. In this story, we see the ideal collaboration between humans and God when selecting a new leader: gather, identify, pray, let God decide. Once the disciples had been restored to that ideal, complete number of twelve, the leadership was established and they would soon “welcome the long-awaited promise of the Spirit.”¹

PENTECOST

On the day of Pentecost, “*they were all together in one place*” (Acts 2.1). We notice that it is when the believers are all together that the Holy Spirit descends on them. They’re filled with power and abilities (to speak in other languages, particularly). They confound those near them, who even accuse them of being drunk!

Here we perhaps have an allusion to the Tower of Babel. Humans became prideful and joined forces to build a great tower that would presumably stretch all the way to heaven itself! But God would not allow this. Indeed, he intervened and confused their languages so that they could not work together for their own selfish gain. Here in Acts, we see that through the Holy Spirit, God is enabling the early followers to communicate in multiple languages so that they can unite to accomplish God’s purposes! Here we have the opposite of the experience with the Tower of Babel. Instead of confusing and hindering, God clarified and enabled. The Holy Spirit united them *in their diversity*—Christ followers, Jews and proselytes.

This was not the first or last time the Holy Spirit would unite believers. In the Gospel of John, Jesus prayed that the disciples would be unified (John 17.11). It was the will of Jesus and his father that the disciples would be united, and that later generations of believers would also experience unity through prayer.

After Peter’s sermon (Acts 2.14–36), the hearers were moved and convicted. About 3,000 were baptized and “added” to the movement of Christ followers. Where did that power come from? What was the source of that incredible movement? Was it Peter’s rousing sermon? Was it the fact that the believers were speaking in different languages? I propose that it was by virtue of prayer. The early followers had first and foremost committed themselves to a lifestyle of prayer, and God honored that by moving powerfully among them. Those first Christ-followers were actually meeting *for prayer*. Luke does not give us the sense that they were meeting for a meal or lecture, and they happened to have an opening or closing prayer. Prayer was central to what they were about, and to their daily activities.

PRAYER: PURPOSES

There are thirty-two direct references to prayer in the book of Acts. Of those references, fifteen of them indicate corporate prayer and fifteen recount instances of individual prayer. The remaining two references are in chapter 16, where we learn of a *place of prayer*.

Luke tells us of a few specific purposes for which the church prayed: to select a leader, to receive the Spirit, to intercede, to raise someone from the dead, to entrust elders to the Lord and to heal someone. Beyond this, they’re simply portrayed as a people *who pray*. And when these people prayed, things happened. In Acts 4.31, prayer brought about an earthquake and a Holy Spirit-filled assembly who “spoke the word of God with boldness.”

“THE PRAYERS”

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and *the prayers*” (Acts 2.42). Scholars are hard-pressed to find much in the way of prescriptions or schedules for “the prayers” that are referenced in Acts 2.42. There is some support for the idea that the early church prayed the Lord’s Prayer daily. Outside of the book of Acts, we have no “eyewitness” accounts of the life of the early church.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 238.

This becomes an issue when we look for prayers, liturgies, hymns and the like, and seek documentation not only regarding substance, but also of use and frequency.

We find some biblical and extra-biblical evidence for services or prayers multiple times per day. Temple services (and later, synagogue services) were held two times per day, once in the morning and once in the evening. This was based on the sacrificial schedule and is well attested in rabbinic literature and the writings of early church fathers.²

In Daniel 6.10 and Psalm 4.17, we find references to three hours of prayer. In the ancient world, there were three principle divisions of the day: the third, sixth and ninth hours. It is altogether possible and perhaps likely that these were convenient times for prayer (there were probably bells that rang in the city at those hours). In Acts, Luke tells us of significant events that occurred at these hours.

“It was the third hour . . .” When the Holy Spirit descended on the gathered believers, Luke tells us by way of Peter’s speech that it was about nine o’clock, or the third hour (Acts 2.15). “It was the sixth hour . . .” When Peter saw the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven with all of the unclean animals, it was at the sixth hour and he was on the rooftop praying (Acts 10.9). “It was the ninth hour . . .” When Peter and John healed the man at the temple who had been lame from birth, we are told that it was the ninth hour. Peter and John were going to the temple for what was presumably a time of public (“public” in the sense that there were several believers gathered in one place) prayer (Acts 3.1).

The *Didache* references three hours of prayer, but there is no consensus regarding the meaning of such a reference, nor whether the prayers were public or private.³ There is debate regarding whether the three references in Acts (Acts 2.15; 10.9; 3.1), which indicate prayers at specific hours of the day, are references to “temple or synagogue hours of prayer.”⁴ Some argue that rather than being intrinsic to the early church, the association of the three hours of the day with Christian hours of prayer began with Tertullian, who *Christianized* these three hours as *hours of prayer*.⁵

TRANSFORMED BY PRAYER

What bearing does this have on the church today? Whether the *hours of prayer* began with the Israelites, the early church, or the early church fathers, is there value in scheduled times of prayer? We shy away from such schedules and prescriptions, preferring instead the organic, spontaneous and continuous life of prayer. This is good; but are we missing something? Is there a both-and option? I propose a corporate or public prayer life that is regular, intentional and available.

Regularity

We could be transformed by cultivating lives marked by daily, regular prayer. Certainly many of us are already experiencing this transformation on an individual level. Would we also benefit from pausing from our day to join our sisters and brothers in heart, mind and spirit, through prayer? It need not be very formal. Sometimes when a sister or brother is about to undergo surgery, we have a prayer marathon where everyone is asked to sign up for a specific segment of time during which they are committed in prayer. We could have midweek gatherings for prayer alone; no agenda, no lesson. How would our church body be transformed if we did this on a regular basis?

2. See Tertullian, *On Prayer* 25; Cyprian, *On the Lord’s Prayer* 35.

3. Dikran Y. Hadidian, “The Background and Origin of the Christian Hours of Prayer,” 60, in *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays*, ed. Everett Ferguson (Volume XV: “Worship in Early Christianity”); New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 244.

4. *Ibid.*, 68, 252.

5. *Ibid.*

Intentionality

How would our gatherings be transformed if we regularly gathered for nothing other than prayer? When we gather as a corporate body, or in small groups, seldom do we miss an opportunity for prayer. But, how often is our prayer more than a mere *baptizing* of the gathering? What I mean by this is that often our gatherings have something other than prayer as the “main attraction,” and sometimes we use prayer as little more than a means to invite God into our midst and/or show deference. Of course these are noble purposes, but is there something more?

It’s easy to think of prayer as something that we do before a meal, when we’re at the end of our rope, or when someone is ill. We offer prayers as part of our Sunday morning services, but many of us grow fidgety when the prayer lasts more than a couple of minutes. Because, you see, the prayer is not the main attraction. In most of our churches, the Sunday morning assemblies hinge on the sermon; it is the element that ties all of the rest together. The sermon is often the main event, which tempts us to cast the preacher in the starring role. Certainly if the sermon is divinely inspired, we would assert that God or the Holy Spirit is the actual star. But it is all too easy to focus on the preacher and the sermon itself. Some churches focus on the celebration of the Eucharist as the main event. This is good, but still lacking. What if we had regular gatherings that featured prayer as the main or only attraction?

Availability

In general, when we gather, we gather to *do something*. We gather to *share a meal, join our voices in worship, hear a sermon, share in the Lord’s Supper, witness a baptism, or to learn from and participate in a Bible class*. What if, instead of gathering to *do something*, we gathered to *be something: available*. When we open ourselves up in prayer, we are inviting the Spirit to move in and among us. We make no disclaimers about *how much* we’re willing to let God work; we simply invite him to come inside and clean house. “Come inside this heart of mine, it’s not my own; make it home. Come and take this heart and make it all your own. Welcome home . . . Take me, make me all you want me to be. That’s all I’m asking, all I’m asking.”⁶

This requires a certain degree of vulnerability, and there are risks. When we open ourselves to God in prayer, we invite him to move into our hearts, uncover impurities and create in us a clean heart. We bid him to renew a right spirit within us and to keep us in his presence (Psalm 51).

We sing beautiful hymns about prayer: “Abide With Me”; “Jesus, Hold My Hand”; “O To Be Like Thee”; “Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer”; “I Come to the Garden Alone”; “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” and many others. Through these hymns, we ask for a constant sense of God’s presence, and for God to mold our hearts ever to be more like him. Our hymns often shape, and sometimes even become, our prayers. We sing about a “sweet hour of prayer” that “calls [us] from a world of care, and bids [us] at [our] Father’s throne, Make all [our] wants and wishes known.”⁷ What is this “sweet hour of prayer” that we sing about? Perhaps the author, W. W. Walford, had in mind a daily time of being quiet before the Lord. Perhaps we, as a faith community, could adapt this and practice our own “sweet hour of prayer.”

We often sing about coming to God on bended knee or humbly bowing before him. How would our individual and corporate prayers be impacted if we stretched ourselves outside of our comfort zones by actually kneeling or bowing before our king and father in prayer? We talk about entering the throne room of God, but are hesitant to physically enact that with our bodies. What if we demonstrated with our bodies what we feel in our spirits: the mighty and awesome nature of God, our king. From the words of a contemporary

6. Shaun Groves, “Welcome Home,” Christian Lyrics Online, <http://www.christianlyricsonline.com/artists/shaun-groves/welcome-home.html> (accessed May 2, 2010).

7. W. W. Walford, “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” (1845) *Songs of Faith and Praise* (Louisiana: Howard Publishing Company, 1994), p. 827.

Christian song: “to come into the presence of the living Lord is to be changed. We cannot come before his high and holy name and stay the same.”⁸ But the presence of the Lord is where people have longed to be since the earliest wanderings of the Israelites in the desert. It is an awe-inspiring and fear-inducing place, but it is the place where we become more like our Creator. In the presence of the Lord, our impurities and selfish motives are revealed. In the presence of the Lord, there is comfort and peace. In the presence of the Lord, our hearts are refreshed and we are transformed in ever-increasing glory.

I challenge us to incorporate regular, intentional moments and gatherings for no other purpose than prayer. I challenge us to do more than just talk *at* God, but to also make ourselves available by practicing prayerful listening.

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8. Mike Hudson, “To Come Into The Presence,” Straitway Music, 1982. Higher Praise, <http://www.higherpraise.com/lyrics/cool/t/TO%20COME%20INTO%20THE%20PRESENCE.htm> (accessed May 1, 2010).