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# Devote Yourselves to Prayer

LINDY EMERSON

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*Editors' Note: In light of her experiences working with the Bronx Fellowship of Christ (BFC), we asked Lindy to reflect on the most pragmatic portion of Paul's letter to the Colossians, 4.2–18. BFC focuses on being "a church for those without a church" through creating a network of "house" churches, communities that meet regularly in homes, parks, diners or other suitable venues across the Bronx and Westchester County.*

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.  
Colossians 4.2–6, *NIV*.

Here in Colossians Paul presents a vision I am trying to live out today, and often live into. He calls the Colossians, who are meeting in homes (cf. 4.15), to be devoted in prayer. We are learning in the Bronx what Paul declares to the Colossians, the necessity of prayer to open doors of opportunity and to bring clarity to our message. Prayer affects and encompasses all parts of our life, from our view of the world to our praise. Hence, it grounds Paul's further calls for wisdom, grace, and courage in revealing the mystery of Christ to those around us.

I did not intend to end up in the Bronx, but rather wanted to serve in an overseas mission. However, after many protests with the Lord, I found myself in a completely different ministry context than I anticipated. I have just begun the second year of a two-year apprenticeship with a team of church planters in the Bronx, NY. This church plant is a network of home churches, dedicated to reaching out to unchurched, often post-Christendom, people in the Bronx. There are many challenges as this relational-based church model attempts to renew and restore community and relationships in a multi-ethnic city, while also confronting many economic, cultural, and educational differences. Throughout the week, you will find me using the Bible to teach conversational English, worshiping in the home of a refugee family from West Africa, sharing fellowship and life lessons with neighborhood teenagers in my apartment, discussing theology in my Muslim friend's home, or breaking bread and praying in the home of my Dominican sister. A set routine is difficult. Sometimes, all of my English students call in to cancel at the last minute. Other times, teenagers show up without notice at my door wanting to hang out and share their stories.

The stories the teens share are of muggers, gangs, and ghetto school experiences. The teens sometimes smoke weed, sporadically carry weapons, occasionally get in trouble with the police, regularly cut school, and swear continually, and yet they are the very people who have taught me about Jesus coming to the unlikely. They are the ones that walk me home late at night, and instant message me to make sure I have returned home safe from traveling. I have heard them pray honest prayers declaring, "Dad, you know I



haven't talked to you in six years like this, but I know you know my weakness." They have actually stopped smoking weed because of a youth retreat they declared "the coolest religious experience ever." They frequently answer questions about the Bible with an exclamation of "Hell, no!" They are unafraid to disagree outright with my interpretation of scripture, yet they admit that there is a peace in our apartments they have never experienced before. I have learned quickly that the Lord more often than not works in ways we never anticipate.

It's been said that a prayer movement precedes every church movement. As we desire transformation citywide and as we seek movement, I recognize how much Paul's word, "devote," is rarely one I would use to describe my prayer life. As we began to take prayer more seriously, I quickly learned that with such devotion comes a necessity to be watchful and thankful because prayers were being answered. In the past, college students coming on Spring Break campaigns have focused primarily on acts of service. But in response to such convictions, we decided to have our last Spring Break campaign focus primarily on prayer. If one looked at the students' schedule, one might have thought there was too much empty space for prayer and reflection. However, it left space in our schedule for God to open a door for us to get to know the teenagers whom I now meet with weekly. Prayer finds power in simplicity, like the simple birthday party the campaign group put on for these teens. What for most of us is a commonplace event turned out to be the first birthday party ever for a seventeen-year-old Buddhist teenager. A few months later, when our summer interns arrived, their internship continued with this focus on prayer. God opened a door through their conversational English classes for us to proclaim the message of Christ in the home of a Dominican family. This family is now hosting weekly Bible studies in Spanish.

As for me personally, I had no idea how difficult it would be live out Paul's call in New York City. Certainly, coming here to do full time ministry has given me the opportunity to live out this call to devotion and boldness in ways I previously would never have allowed. When I am in a completely foreign context, it is much easier to be conscious of the way I act around others, and to try to make the most of every opportunity. When others are giving financially for me to live and serve here, I realize how crucial my life, words, and actions must mirror the One who sent me, and the ones who sent me. I have prayed continually for boldness and the words to speak Life into others I meet. Still, though I earnestly desire to proclaim the mystery of Christ, it is often difficult to do.

I have a Muslim neighbor who has become one of my dearest friends, despite my initial plans of "taking Jesus" to her. My plans were reshaped when I learned that Jesus was already present to her and to the Bronx; he only needed to be revealed to the people he was already living among. My friend and I were discussing the Koran and the Bible. We noted the many similarities between the two, including the presence of Jesus in both. Yet when I explained Jesus' Jewish heritage, our conversation stalled. "Oh my God, Jesus was a Jew?" was her response. "I just can't believe it. Who knew Jesus was a Jew? We can't talk more about this right now. I just can't believe that Jesus was a Jew." It would be weeks later before our conversation would continue. Later, my friend was asking me about the doctrine of the Trinity. I tried to explain it. I tried every parable, analogy, and explanation I had ever heard but was left realizing this was something I had never developed an apologetic for. I felt really clueless as to how to make sense of something that requires so much faith. My friend is not stupid and seeing that my explanations were so inadequate, said, "You should run for Senate. I asked a question and you successfully didn't give me an answer. A perfect candidate for a political campaign! Lindy, how about you figure out what you are trying to say, and we'll talk later? You're just confusing me." We agreed. My message was anything but clear that day, but thankfully I was given a chance to explain it to her again. That day it was my Muslim friend's words which were, as Paul says, "full of grace," and I had to admit that I fell short in "knowing how to answer" about the hope I have within.

One day at the post office, I was reminded of how far I still need to go. We were in a line that was already spilling outside, and the post office workers were seemingly teasing us, standing there, drinking cof-

fee, despite the fact they should have opened twenty minutes earlier. Tensions were high and as I minded my business, the man behind me caught my gaze and began talking. I was the only other white face in the line so he must have thought I would welcome his conversation. He belittled and verbally defaced the ethnicities of the people working there and standing in line, using horrible terms such “cockroaches” and “niggers.” I was shocked and appalled. I wanted words. I wanted words to tell this man that his beliefs were wrong and that he was being a bigot. I wanted words that would show that I was a follower of Christ, and not of a specific ethnicity or social class. I wanted words to speak life and truth to the people in line who were looking at me. I said nothing. I prayed for words, yet none came. I left in tears because I was not prepared to make the most of that opportunity.

Another day I was in one of the only local Starbucks, trying to enjoy some time with God. As I got ready to order I found myself in the middle of a fight between the cashier and a customer over a receipt with the wrong drink name printed on it. Being sandwiched between the two sides left me no place to go, with prayer as my only defense. The customer eventually threw the cup of coffee at the cashier and undercover cops appeared to escort the customer out of this Starbucks for good. I wanted to have words of peace and love to speak to the angry and bitter people around me, yet was left only shaken up, with the harsh reminder of how severely this place needs the love of Jesus revealed to them.

It is when I reflect on the times that I’m at the post office, Starbucks, or talking with my Muslim friend that I am thankful for what comes later in Colossians, the part that we do not tend to read carefully because it seems to contain only greetings. Colossians 4.7–18—where Paul mentions the dear brother Tychicus and faithful Onesimus, as well as Aristarchus, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha, Aristarchus, and the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis—reveals a community of believers, a community widespread and diverse, including Jews and Greeks, and probably Scythians and barbarians as well. People we can call by name and others who are simply “brothers and sisters.” People that remind us of the importance of living out the call of prayer and boldness found in Colossians 4.2–6, yet encourage us when we appear to fail this admonition. It is this community of believers that I rejoice in.

**LINDY EMERSON** RECEIVED A B.A. IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (WITH HONORS) FROM ROCHESTER COLLEGE, ROCHESTER HILLS, MICHIGAN, IN MAY OF 2005. AFTER GRADUATION, LINDY CHOSE NOT TO RETURN TO HER HOME STATE OF MISSOURI BUT RATHER TO ENTER INTO MINISTRY IN NEW YORK CITY, WORKING WITH THE BRONX FELLOWSHIP OF CHRIST. MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES AND BFC CAN BE FOUND AT [LINDYERIN.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://LINDYERIN.BLOGSPOT.COM) AND [BRONXFELLOWSHIP.ORG](http://BRONXFELLOWSHIP.ORG).

