

DEVOTED TO PRAYER

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After rising from the dead and ascending back to Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ poured out the Holy Spirit on His followers. On that day, known as the Day of Pentecost, Peter stood up to declare what God had done and who Jesus really was—Lord of Heaven and Earth—and 3,000 people chose to follow Him and declared their allegiance by being baptized in water.

These new believers in Jesus “joined with the other believers” in a collective pursuit of the plan of God. Together, they “devoted themselves” to the new life Jesus had given them.

Right here, let me emphasize something you may not have heard before: when you entrust your life to Jesus Christ, you cannot walk out the door and simply return to the way of life you have always known. That is, you cannot continue to live your life as you have *and* live the new life in Christ as well. New life in Jesus is not an *addition* to your familiar lifestyle.

There is a good reason that Jesus said, “Don’t be surprised when I tell you, you must be born again from above.” A new birth is demanded because the old life is insufficient in every way.

Regardless of your personal goodness or your religiousness, you must be born again and you must begin again. This is a new life.

In what ways is it new? Not physically (same body, same physical issues, though there may be some immediate healings). Not mentally (same mind and memory, though some shift will be noted, especially more hopeful). What has been radically changed (and yet is seldom perceived) is your spirit—that deepest part of who you are as a person, the values and vision that define you. It is seldom perceived because we are so obtuse, disconnected from spiritual reality, unacquainted with the ways of God—in a word, spiritually dead.

Thus, the need for a new birth. Also, the cause of so much spiritual immaturity.

Imagine this: A young couple has just given birth to a new baby. The difficulties of the previous nine months are behind them and the joys of parenthood lie immediately ahead. Packing up their things, they leave the hospital, arm and arm. When they arrive home, he sweeps her off her feet into his arms and carried her across the threshold, just like the day they married. They are elated!

Everything is ready. The nursery was completed weeks ago. Diapers are in abundant supply. New blankets and onesies are laid out for the new addition. Only one thing is missing. But they comfort

one another with these words, “I can’t wait for our new daughter to get here! I’m sure she’ll find her way home. The hospital isn’t far, and she looked so healthy.”

How absurd! Infancy and childhood are not meant to be done alone! Children are not to be left to fend for themselves. Every child *needs* a family—a stable family—for positive growth. The same is true spiritually.

Maturity in Christ is not an accident. It is the result of a joint intention of the church and the new believer. The local church must be a warm, accepting brooder for new believers, no matter how strange their appearance or behavior seems at first. And young believers need the consistent fellowship of older believers, no matter how inconvenient to their familiar “lifestyle” it may seem.

This is how the Early Church survived the hardships and persecutions that befell them, and this is why they enjoyed such amazing revivals and growth. Christian discipleship is not a solo adventure.

In their devotion to Christ, they traveled together along four paths:

- They were a learning church
- They were a together church
- They were a feasting church
- **They were a praying church**

Acts 2:42-43 (NET)

They were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles.

The Amplified Bible says: *“They steadfastly persevered, devoting themselves constantly.”*

And the result of their steadfast perseverance was this: *“reverential awe and many wonders and miraculous signs.”*

How many of you long to experience “reverential awe” in the presence of the Holy Spirit? How many hope to witness “wonders and miraculous signs”? I do, too! So, let’s make this connection today. Observe the context of this passage. Recognize the progression of events. This is the Word of God.

The context is collective devotion. That’s where we need to begin. We must build collective devotion. We must break down the barriers that keep us apart, and intentionally build social bridges to fellowship in the Spirit, if we hope to experience “reverential awe.”

For it is in this context of collective devotion and reverential awe that people are empowered to perform “wonders and miraculous signs.” The preacher does not bring them in his briefcase. They

are not the result of being in a particular location. Nor are they simply a matter of “God’s timing.” You, or more accurately, WE play a key role.

If we—as they did—will steadfastly persevere, devoting ourselves constantly to teaching, fellowship, celebration, and prayer, we will generate the atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit is free to, and loves to work.

A Praying Church

The Church began in a prayer meeting. They waited in prayer for the Lord’s promise, “Not many days from now you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Revivals, great and small, throughout history, have begun in prayer.

As God was pouring out His Spirit on the Church in America at the beginning of the twentieth century, a call was made to any who had experienced the baptism with the Holy Spirit to come together and meet. In August of 1914, more than 300 people arrived in Hot Springs, Arkansas. They got right down to business—the business of prayer—and did nothing else but pray together for four days. The result was spiritual unity and a conviction that God had raised them up “for such a time as this.” So began the Assemblies of God, which now numbers over 67 million adherents around the world.

The Early Church devoted themselves to “the prayers” with which they were familiar. When the author of Acts used the phrase, “the prayers,” he was not referring to specific prayers or the words used in prayer, but to the various types of prayer that might be offered. Among the Jewish believers, that included the standard hours of formal prayer in the Temple and synagogues.

Among the common types of prayers that we practice is the pastoral prayer. This is a particular kind of prayer, offered in a public setting, that fulfills the priestly office of praying *on behalf* of the congregation. It is a representative role. The congregation listens “over the shoulder” as the pastor prays on its behalf.

One person is praying aloud, but everyone listens in and follows along. In fact, we may join in, with the occasional “Amen” or “Yes, Lord.” The words may be spoken by a pastor or deacon, but we all may join in the prayer. So, even when only one person is speaking the prayer, we can still be praying. Corporate prayer can be led by one person while we all participate and add our affirmations.

More to the point, don’t “check out” while someone else leads the church in prayer. That’s not the time to scan your phone for new messages. Instead, “check in” mentally, follow along with their words, and express your agreement whenever you can. It’s like taking a ride in the Spirit with them as they pray.

Upgrading Corporate Prayers

While the pastoral prayer may be the most prominent prayer in our gatherings, there are a myriad of other prayers that could be taken more seriously than they usually are. (Much of the following has been drawn from *There is No I in Church*, pages 50-52)

Invocation. The *opening prayer*, or *invocation*, should be something more than a device to get people to quiet down; it should be a serious corporate prayer by which we genuinely invite God to be present among us and reveal His power.

Prelude Prayer. Some churches have a *prelude prayer team* that gathers around the altar to pray for the service as the people are entering. This creates an anticipatory atmosphere.

Offertory Prayer. Our *offertory prayers* should be true prayers offered to God rather than stewardship promotions directed at the congregation.

Closing Prayer. *Closing prayers*, should avoid reviewing the points of the sermon and instead offer true benedictions, or prayers for God's blessing, as we leave.

Listening Prayer. We may try to incorporate *listening prayer*, like the Quakers have practiced for so long. Listening prayer, within an accountable community, is a safe way for God's voice to be heard.

Litany. Some churches use prepared written prayers that include a suggested response by the people. These are called *litanies*, and congregations that prefer a more formal worship style use them frequently. In our setting, litanies are usually reserved for big events like building dedications or ordination services, but litanies could be used occasionally to enrich our corporate prayer life. They may help people to "put words" to the prayers of their hearts.

Psalter Prayer. Praying the written prayers in the Bible assumes that God himself has written excellent prayers and that we ought to use them, giving priority to His words over ours. Sometimes old ideas are the best new ideas.

Open Altar. Sometimes, we provide an *open altar*, a time of prayer during which those wishing to pray about particular needs are invited to pray at the altar of the church while church leaders pray over them.

Small Group Prayer. Over the past decade, *small group prayer* has been used as a part of corporate worship. Worshipers move informally into groups of about three to six people and spend several minutes praying together.

Concert of Prayer. A *concert of prayer* is an entire service devoted to prayer. We have services dedicated to singing; why not to prayer? This is what we have begun last month with two nights of Prayer Power, and will share together this month on Friday the 19th. Shouldn't you join fellow believers to offer to God one evening for prayer?

Season of Prayer. Some churches feature a *season of prayer* in the midst of their worship service, in which everyone prays aloud at the same time, creating a cacophony of prayer—some in known languages, some in unknown tongues. Outsiders listening to such prayers might wonder if we have gone off our rocker, and even some insiders object that it is confusing, but the point is not to try to listen to the prayers but to join in. Catch the wave and ride it! Or, I might say, catch the Spirit.

Prayer for Healing. Many times we will come together believing that God will heal a brother or sister. We offer *prayers for healing*, just as the Apostle James prescribed (James 5:14-16).

Prayer Meeting. Of course, we should not forget *prayer meetings*, the practice of setting aside one service every week devoted completely to prayer—a weekly concert of prayer. It is in such a setting that great churches, like the Brooklyn Tabernacle, have been built. Their Tuesday night prayer meetings draw thousands of believers each week. It is the backbone of their ministry.

There are other ways to enhance and magnify prayer in our gatherings, but these are enough to get us thinking. We will be seasoning our gatherings with a variety of these methods, in order to increase the overall amount of prayer that takes place among us. Why would we want that? Because God said, “*My house shall be called a house of prayer.*” And because He has promised that He “bends down to listen” when we pray.

Praying in the Spirit

Finally, let me offer a few words about praying in the Spirit, or in unknown tongues.

Paul taught that praying in unknown tongues is as valid as praying in your mother tongue (your familiar language). He taught that praying in tongues speaks to God, but not to men. Other people usually cannot understand what you are saying, so it doesn't benefit them directly. But God understands you perfectly, and the Spirit is helping you to pray “according to the will of God.”

Paul also said that when we pray in tongues, we “give thanks well.” So, this is a great way to express your gratitude to God. Just let your mind reflect on God's goodness while you speak the words the Spirit gives you.

In a group setting, you should pray in tongues quietly, so as not to distract others, unless the whole group is praying in tongues together. It is a marvelous way to “join in” with others as they pray. I frequently default to praying in tongues, unless I have something specific to pray. This

helps keep my mind focused on the Holy Spirit, instead of drifting into daydreams or other distractions.

When you are praying alone, pray in tongues frequently and aloud. Give yourself to it; don't hold back. It may feel awkward at first, but the Bible teaches that praying in tongues builds us up spiritually. So, practice it until it feels normal to you. Since praying in tongues satisfies the will of God and builds us up at the same time, we should practice it as often as we can. Try spending 50% of your prayer time praying in the Spirit like this. You will benefit from it!

Together

And remember, most people who experience discomfort in praying, are simply unfamiliar with praying. More frequent practice will eliminate that problem.

There are lots of ways to pray, and the best of them are practiced *together*. Take one of my suggestions today as a means of enhancing your present practice of prayer. Find a friend who prays, or wants to pray, and get to work. Join a prayer group, or attend a prayer meeting. No one starts as a pro, but no one becomes proficient in prayer who refuses to start and keep at it.

Welcome to the School of Prayer!