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T O G E T H E R
I N P R A Y E R

Coming to God in Community




IVP Connect

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THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY PRAYER

THE CLOSEST THAT MANY BELIEVERS come to group prayer is listening to a pastor pray from up front during the worship service. Prayer in the church today seems to be most often relegated to a few key leaders and perhaps a small set of people whose focus is to pray for the church.

Although we don't know for certain exactly how the New Testament church prayed together, it seems reasonable to believe that their experience of prayer was much more participatory than this. Phrases like "they all joined together constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14), "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . . and to prayer" (Acts 2:42), "they raised their voices together in prayer" (Acts 4:24) and many others seem to portray prayer not as a spectator sport but as a participatory practice.

In many cases, the best way to move a church toward this participatory model of prayer is through the small group

ministry. This is true for several reasons:

1. People are more comfortable praying with people they know than praying with strangers.
2. Small groups provide the best setting for a person to be fully known, and thus most effectively prayed for.
3. Small groups are usually a good place for encouraging spiritual disciplines, particularly community disciplines.

In spite of this, somewhat rare is the small group that consistently prays together effectively. In most small groups, prayer is limited to perhaps an opening prayer before the Bible study and maybe a closing prayer, plus perhaps a prayer for a crisis situation in one member's life. Consistent, ongoing prayer for life-change is simply not a part of the experience of most small groups; and yet, such prayer may be the single most empowering thing that a small group could do to develop Christlike character in its members.

Why is it that so few small groups pray together consistently and effectively? I can think of a couple of reasons. First, we fail to understand the importance of *community prayer*. We have personalized most of the examples and teachings of the New Testament to the point that we neglect their relevance to a community setting. Second, we don't know how to pray well together. Too often, small group prayer leaves group members flat and uninterested.

In the next chapter we'll consider whether there's a "right" way, according to the New Testament, to pray together. But first let's look at the importance of community prayer in the early church.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYING TOGETHER

From Jesus' teaching to the practice of the early church to the commands and urgings of the Epistles, the New Testament paints the picture of group prayer as a normal part of the lives of believers and churches. Even before there was a church, Jesus clearly expected believers to pray together. The famous promise, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" is given in a context of praying together: "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19-20). This expectation also seems to be implied in the wording of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Note that all the first-person pronouns in this prayer are plural, implying that it is meant primarily as a prayer to be prayed in a community setting.

In Jesus' time of greatest trial, in the garden of Gethsemane, he took with him the three most trusted disciples, asking them to keep watch with him and pray. Knowing the temptations they would face in the next few days and already

having predicted their denial of him, Jesus warned them: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Mt 26:41). Jesus gave them each other to keep them watchful at prayer. How much more, two thousand years removed, does the church today need to be a body that prays together and keeps each other watchful?

Scripture doesn't provide much detail about how the early church prayed together, but we do know that it was the practice of the church to gather often, and a key component of that gathering was prayer. We read in Acts 1:14 that the disciples “joined together constantly in prayer.” Acts 2:42 implies a commitment to praying in community, as the other key practices mentioned are all community practices.

We get a glimpse of an early church prayer meeting in Acts 4:23-31. The believers raise their voices together in praise to God after the release of Peter and John by the Sanhedrin. Again in Acts 12:12 we see the believers gathered together in prayer, presumably for Peter's release from prison. Barnabas and Paul are commissioned for their first missionary trip in a context of community fasting and prayer in Acts 13. Paul and his companions, when in a town too small for a synagogue, go down to a place by the river to pray together (Acts 16:13, 16). Paul and Silas hold a two-man “prayer meeting” in prison in Acts 16:25. Again, we find Paul praying with the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:36.

The church was begun in a context of prayer; the apostles and the earliest believers were in the habit of praying together regularly, and as the church grew and spread beyond Jerusalem, the focus on corporate prayer spread with it. In towns like Antioch and Ephesus corporate prayer seemed to

be the norm. Again, we don't know exactly what that prayer looked like, but we do know that it was a focus of the earliest church and then of the missionary church.

The “rugged individualism” that so marks modern Western civilization has caused us to look at much of the instruction and narrative in Acts and the Epistles exclusively in terms of the individual. While there is no doubt personal application in these texts for the individual, Gene Getz, in his book *Praying for One Another*, points out that we miss the crux of these teachings when we ignore their corporate context. Consider the following commands regarding prayer from Paul's epistles:

- “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Rom 12:12).
- “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:19-20).
- “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).
- “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7).
- “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col 4:2).
- “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all cir-

cumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16-18).

Certainly these commands all apply to individual believers, but they also apply to churches as bodies, especially since that's the audience for which they were originally written. These commands become richer when we realize that they are not just God's will for individuals but also God's will for his church. In addition, they become easier to observe when we can draw strength from one another as we obey them.

When Paul writes to the churches to "pray for us" (Eph 6:19-20; Col 4:3; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1) and when the writer to the Hebrews asks the same thing (Heb 13:18), the context indicates that they should lift up these missionaries in prayer together, not just in their own private prayers. When we recall that these letters were written to be read aloud during church meeting times, it's not too hard to imagine the various congregations going straight to prayer for the authors of the letters as soon as they were read.

James, in possibly one of the most challenging exhortations to community prayer, urged the believers to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (Jas 5:16). Obviously, the only way to confess sins to other believers is to do so in a context of community. To James, confession, repentance and prayer were to be corporate acts, not merely individual ones.

Peter may have had something similar in mind when he spoke of the church being a "holy priesthood" (1 Pet 2:4-10). When he urges the believers to "be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (1 Pet 4:7), the context of loving one another and using spiritual gifts to serve one an-

other clearly implies that he has in mind praying together. Perhaps he recalls in this verse Jesus' admonition to his inner circle of disciples in the garden of Gethsemane to "watch and pray."

PRAYER IN THE CHURCH TODAY

We can safely conclude that praying together was a significant part of the early church's life. What was it about community prayer that kept the early church praying together like this? Was it God's faithfulness in answering, even to the point of performing miracles? Was it the sweetness of coming into God's presence together? Was it the encouragement of being lifted up in prayer by those who knew them best? Was it maybe a combination of all these and more?

What was true of the early church is true of the church today: God reveals his power and his love consistently as the church seeks him in prayer. We can expect his blessing and direction in our lives as we come into his presence in prayer as a community. Community prayer, so important in the life of the early church, should occupy a similar place in the church today.

Unfortunately, the fact that community prayer is so important to the life of the body doesn't mean that it's also easy to practice effectively. Many groups that do actually pray together regularly struggle to pray well together. They keep plugging away because they know it's important to pray together, but their times of prayer are not as meaningful or effective as they could be.

Is it possible that the reason we don't pray well together is that we don't know how to pray together? Might there be

some principles that could guide our times of prayer together and improve our community prayer lives? In the next chapter, we'll examine these questions in more depth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

1. How do you picture prayer taking place in the early church?
2. What has been your experience of prayer in a group setting? Has that experience been positive or negative for you overall? How so?
3. Why might community prayer be less common today than it was in the early church? What are some of the hurdles to community prayer today?