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Prayer & the Prayer Meeting

Compiled from the Writings of C. H. Mackintosh

How often are our prayers more like orations than petitions—more like statements of doctrine than utterances of need! It seems, at times, as though we mean to explain principles to God, and give Him a large amount of information. These are the things which cast a withering influence over our prayer-meetings, robbing them of their freshness, their interest, and their value. Those who really know what prayer is—who feel its value, and are conscious of their need of it, attend the prayer-meeting in order to pray, not to hear orations, lectures, and expositions from men on their knees. If they want lectures, they can attend at the lecture-hall; but when they go to the prayer-meeting, it is to pray. Such is their idea of “the place where prayer is wont to be made”; and therefore when they flock thither, they are not disposed or prepared to listen to long preaching prayers, which would be barely tolerable if delivered from the pulpit, but which are absolutely insufferable in the shape of prayer.

The Need for “True Prayer” at the Prayer Meeting

We write plainly, because we feel the need of great plainness of speech. We deeply feel our want of reality, sincerity, and truth in our prayers and prayer-meetings. Frequently it happens that what we call prayer is not prayer at all, but the flowery utterance of certain known and acknowledged truths and principles, to which one has listened so often that the reiteration becomes tiresome in the extreme. What can be more painful than to hear a man on his knees explaining principles and unfolding doctrines? The question forces itself upon us. “Is the man speaking to God, or to us?” If to God, surely nothing can be more irreverent or profane than to attempt to explain things to Him.

The simple fact is, we are too vague and, as a consequence, too indifferent in our prayers and prayer-meetings. We do not seem like people *asking for what they want, and waiting for what they ask*. This is what destroys our prayer-meetings, rendering them pithless, pointless, powerless, turning them into teaching or talking meetings, rather than deep-toned, earnest prayer-meetings. We feel convinced that the whole church of God needs to be thoroughly aroused in reference to this great

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question; and this conviction it is which compels us to offer these exhortations and practical suggestions.

Suppose our lot is cast in a place where spiritual death and darkness reign. There is not so much as a single breath of life—not a leaf stirring. The Heaven above seems like brass; the earth beneath, iron. Such a thing as a conversion is never heard of. A withering formalism seems to have settled down upon the entire place. Powerless profession, dead routine, stupefying mechanical religiousness are the order of the day. What is to be done? Are we to allow ourselves to fall under the fatal influence of the surrounding malaria? Are we to yield to the paralyzing power of the atmosphere that engulfs the place? Assuredly not.

Beware of Calvinistic Tendencies in Prayer

If not, what then? Let us, even if there be but two who really feel the condition of things, get together, with one accord, and pour out our hearts to God. Let us wait on Him, in holy concord, with united, firm purpose, until He sends a generous shower of blessing upon the barren spot. Let us not fold our arms and vainly say, "The time is not come." Let us not yield to that pernicious offshoot of a one-sided theology (of Calvinism), which is rightly called fatalism, and say, "God is sovereign, and He works according to His own will. We must wait His time. Human effort is in vain. We cannot get up a revival. We must beware of mere excitement."

All this seems very plausible; and the more so because there is a measure of truth in it; indeed it is all true, so far as it goes: but it is only one side of the truth. It is truth, and nothing but the truth; but it is not the whole truth—Hence its mischievous tendency. There is nothing more to be dreaded than one-sided truth; it is far more dangerous than positive, obvious error. Many an earnest soul has been stumbled and turned completely out of the way by one-sided or misapplied truth. Many a true-hearted and useful workman has been chilled, repulsed, and driven out of the harvest-field by the injudicious enforcement of certain doctrines having a measure of truth, but not the full truth of God.

Cold and Barren Prayer Meetings

Do we mourn over the coldness, barrenness, and death around us? Are we discouraged by the little apparent fruit from the preaching of the gospel—the lack of power in the preaching itself, and little practical result? Are our souls cast down by the barrenness, dullness, heaviness, and low tone of all our meetings, whether at the Lord's Supper, or around the regular study of Holy Scripture? There is a lack of power and efficacy in our prayers; but they are long in formality, routine, and positive hypocrisy. The psalmist says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). How solemn this is! Our God will have reality. He desires truth in the inward parts. He, blessed be His name, is real with us, and He will have us real with Him. He will have us coming before Him, as we really are, and with what we really want.

"We must never forget the necessity of perseverance. The Scriptures urge us: 'Men ought always to pray, and not to faint' (Luke 18:1). The Lord lays upon our hearts a certain need; we cannot do without it. We by faith, unitedly, and perseveringly, wait on our God until He graciously sends an answer."

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What are we to do? Fold our arms in cold indifference? Give up in despair? Or give vent to complaining, murmuring, fretfulness, or irritation? God forbid! What then? Come together, "with one accord in one place"; get down on our faces before our God, and pour out our hearts, as the heart of one man.

The Word of God teaches that in order to effectually pray, there must be an obedient heart and an upright mind. If the soul be not in communion with God—if it be not abiding in Christ—if it be not ruled by His holy commandments—if the eye be not single, how could we possibly look for answers to our prayers? How could God, as a Holy Father, grant such petitions? Impossible.

It is greatly feared that some of our so-called requests never go beyond the ceiling of the room. In order to reach the throne of God, our prayers must be carried on the wings of faith, proceed from united hearts, in one holy purpose, waiting upon Him for the answer to our requests.

The Danger of Long and Rambling Prayers

Must we not admit that our times of prayer suffer sadly from long, rambling, desultory prayers? Long prayers are often wearisome; indeed, in many cases, they are a positive infliction. It will perhaps be said that we must not prescribe any time to the Holy Spirit. True indeed; away from us be the thought! We are simply comparing what we find in Scripture (where their brief pointedness is characteristic—see Matt. 6; John 17; Acts 4: 24-30; Ephesians 1 & 3; etc.) with what we too often—not always, thank God!—find in our prayer-meetings. Let it, then, be distinctly born in mind that "long prayers" are not the rule in Scripture.

Let it, then, be distinctly born in mind, that "long prayers" are not to be found in Scripture. They are referred to, no doubt, but it is in terms of withering disapproval. And we may further add, that, during very many years of close observation, we have invariably noticed that the prayers of our most spiritual, devoted, intelligent, and experienced brethren have been characterized by brevity, definiteness, and simplicity. This is right and good. It is according to Scripture, and it tends to edification, comfort, and blessing. Brief, fervent, pointed prayers impart great freshness and interest to the prayer-meeting; but, on the other hand, as a general rule, long and desultory prayers exert a most depressing influence upon all.

Perseverance in Prayer

We must never forget the necessity of perseverance. The Scriptures urge us: "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). The Lord lays upon our hearts a certain need; we cannot do without it. We by faith united and persevering, wait on our God until He graciously sends an answer, as He most assuredly will, if we persevere in prayer. We must not faint, and give up, though the answer does not come as speedily as we might expect. It may please God to exercise our souls by keeping us waiting on Him, for days, months, or perhaps years. The exercise is good.

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It is spiritually healthy. It tends to make us real. It brings us down to the very heart of things. Look, for example, at Daniel. He was kept for "three full weeks" waiting on God, in profound exercise of soul. We, too, may have to wait long in the holy attitude of expectancy, and in the spirit of prayer; but we shall find the time of waiting most profitable for our souls. "Praying *always* with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and *watching* thereunto *with all, perseverance* and supplication for all saints" (Eph. 6:18).

Conclusion

Let us not be satisfied to go on with the present condition of things. We call upon all to unite in cordial, earnest, united prayer and supplication. Let us seek to get together according to God; to come as one man and prostrate ourselves in the presence of God, and perseveringly wait upon our God for the revival of His work, the progress of His Gospel, the ingathering and building up of His beloved people.

Let our prayer-meetings be really prayer-meetings, and not occasions for giving out our favorite hymns, and long, rambling prayers on our favorite doctrines. The prayer-meeting ought to be the place of expressed need and expected blessing—the place of expressed weakness and expected power—the place where God's people assemble with one accord, to take hold of the very throne of God, to get into the very treasury of heaven, and draw thence all we want for ourselves, for our households, for the whole church of God, and for the vineyard of Christ. Such is the true idea of a prayer-meeting, if we are to be taught by Scripture. May it be more fully realized among the Lord's people everywhere!

Endnotes

—Compiled from C. H. Mackintosh, *Christian Treasury*, "Prayer and the Prayer Meeting," (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1975)