

Reflections on Prayer

Prayer: A Leader's First Priority

John F. Smed*

** John Smed was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta and has served in church planting for thirty-five years, seven of which were as director for Mission to North America. Over a period of twenty-five years, John and his wife, Caron, and the marvellous co-workers the Lord gave them have planted two churches. John and Caron live in Vancouver. They have five children and three grandchildren. John is the director of the Grace Project – a servant organization for urban church planting and co-founder of Prayer for the City. He has written Journey in Prayer: Learning to Pray the Prayer of Jesus for reaching seekers and discipling new believers.¹ John writes, “. . . I have come to a crossroads in my calling. . . . As opportunities in church planting, prayer training and evangelism expand I realize God is telling me to focus- to ‘devote [myself] to prayer and the word’ (Acts 6:4). I want to be a specific kind of leader – one who leads from the front line of mission like Paul did.”*



Early tremors signal bigger things.

It is often the incidental (seemingly innocent) passage. I was minding my own business, reading Acts, when I felt the bump: “It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables . . . We . . . will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

I was startled. Something struck me as odd, or at least different. Why the insistence on putting prayer and the Word in priority over serving widows?

¹ Other works on prayer by John Smed include: John Smed, *Ancient Prayer, Learning to Pray the Prayer of Jesus* (Vancouver, BC: Prayer for the City, 2010); John Smed with Justine Hwang, “Seven Days of Prayer with Jesus (a seven part curriculum)”, 6th ed. (Vancouver, BC: Grace Vancouver Church, 2009); and John Smed with Justine Hwang, “Prayer Bootcamp for Urban Mission: A 12 week study that connects the gospel to prayer and mission” (Vancouver, BC: Prayer for the City, 2010).

I did a quick glance at the original language – nothing fancy. I found interesting amplifications which added life and texture:

It would not be right (fitting or pleasing – commonly used of pleasing God) for us (the “sent ones”) to neglect (leave behind or abandon) the word of God to wait on tables . . . We . . . will give attention to (hold fast to, continue in) prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:2-4).

Back to the question. Why not wait on tables? Serving the needy is exactly the kind of leadership Jesus insists on. Serve the needy. These people are neglected. They are foreigners who need care (*philozenos*). They are Grecian Jews. More importantly, they are widows. Just google the greatest and gravest commands of Scripture and you will find hospitality for foreigners and care of widows rises to the top. God loves to be called the defender of the widow: “A father to the fatherless, a **defender of widows**, is God in his holy dwelling” (Psalm 68:5). Can any activity take priority over these acts of mercy? The text is clear. For the apostles – and those who want to lead like the apostles – there is a higher priority.

I scrambled – trying to keep my footing. I steadied my nerves and reminded myself, “Of course – that would be preaching to the lost.” For the apostles, preaching to the unconverted was first of all priorities. Preaching (*knpusso*); heralding (*aggello*); announcing (*apaggelo*) and evangelizing (*euaggelizdo*) – express public square preaching, outside the confines of the assembly (*ecclesia*).

I was still on my feet. As of greater importance than deeds of mercy, the apostles devoted themselves to preaching Christ to the lost. It is safe to put proclamation before mercy, as long as they stay in close proximity. “Whew.” I prepared to move on to the next paragraph.

“Not so fast!” (and not so gently) the Spirit persisted with me, “Aren’t you missing something? What about the other priority? The apostles said, ‘We will give attention to prayer’ as well as the Word. Ask yourself. Ask the text. What about prayer? Why equal billing?”

“Now listen,” I said to myself? to my conscience? to something deeper? “In one hundred hours of seminary training, this never came up. In school we hardly glanced at this. How can prayer have equal priority to the Word? It’s absurd. I do not know a single colleague or teacher that puts prayer alongside Word ministry – certainly not equal in priority – not in theory, not in practice.”

Pursuing this logic, I was torn. On the one hand, I was more than nervous. “What if prayer is just as important as Word ministry? What comes of my education, my ministry focus over twenty-five years?” On the other hand, I began to get excited – an inner stirring. Call it a holy curiosity. I was on to something. I resolved to follow the trail.

I took some days to read all of Acts, a passage at a time – determined and with selective vision. I poured over the text to find the place of prayer in the life of the apostles (and the early Church). I took notes.

What came of this? I admit. I was shaken. I saw that prayer pervades this history. Prayer jumps out of the narrative. Even a cursory survey of Acts finds prayer at every important intersection of church and apostolic life:

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers (Acts 1:14). (This is commonly called the ten day prayer meeting.)

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place [praying?] . . . They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:1, 42).

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon (Acts 3:1). (We know they met day by day in the temple. It can be assumed that the “hour of prayer” was a time of choice.)

²³On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God . . . ³¹After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:23ff).

³“ . . . We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word”. . . ⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly . . . (Acts 6:3-7).

Simply put, the apostles were men of prayer. Their apostleship was birthed in prayer. They waited in prayer. They led in prayer, trained and modeled prayer, fought with prayer. Prayer permeated the early Church like indelible dye. The relative innocence of such references to prayer indicates a life and habit of prayer. This is alien to so much of our church experience, to say the least. We meet to study or to sing. They met to pray!

Prayer is one fabric with the Word in the life of the apostles (and the early Church). In this fabric prayer is the vertical strand, Word ministry is the horizontal. Loving fellowship is the rich fabric uniting both. Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

I was not finished with this text. (I should say, “This text was not finished with me.”) There was the question of sequence. The apostles “gave attention to prayer and the ministry of the word”. Prayer comes before the Word. I asked the Spirit, “Why prayer before the Word?” Perhaps it is incidental – the order does not matter. Could Luke just as easily have reversed the order? He might as well have written, “We will give attention to the ministry of the word and prayer.” Perhaps it is simply incidental. Much ado about nothing?

I considered another possibility: Luke’s order indicates that prayer is a leader’s first priority – before the ministry of the Word. I recalled a statement by Oswald Chambers, “We take it for granted that prayer is preparation for the work, whereas prayer is the work.” Prayer is not more important than the Word, but prayer must precede the Word. Why? Because prayer underlies all ministry effectiveness, including preaching. Apart from communion with Christ, nothing good or lasting comes. Only through waiting on Him in prayer will preaching the Word or any other ministry be effective. A prayerless preacher will have a sterile ministry.

I re-scanned the narrative – now with microscopic intensity. The fact that prayer comes first has solid grounding. Before the apostles received the Spirit and found boldness to announce the resurrection, they “waited in prayer” as Jesus had instructed them:

⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about . . . ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” . . . ¹²Then they [the apostles] returned to Jerusalem . . . ¹³When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying . . . ¹⁴They all joined together constantly in prayer . . . (Acts 1:4-14).

At the end of this prayer meeting, their prayers were fully answered. It was the answer to Christ’s promise: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:1-2).

On the day of Pentecost they were gathered in one place. It had to be a public place as they were surrounded by Jews and converts from all over the Roman Empire on this feast day. The exact whereabouts involves some conjecture – so conjecture we will. We know they met from day to day in the temple (Acts 2:46). We also know that the leaders and community observed the hour of prayer – three in the afternoon (Acts 3:1). What would be more appropriate than that a spirit of grace and supplication, promised by Zechariah (Zechariah 12:10ff), should fall upon the people of God during the hour of prayer? Was not the day of Pentecost, which signaled Spirit oneness in wor-

ship and power in mission, also the long promised day when God poured out a spirit of prayer upon his people?

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child . . . (Zechariah 12:10).

Though it was interesting to speculate about location and time, it did not matter. I was converted to the conclusion. Prayer and the Word have equal priority in ministry, but prayer has sequential priority. In practice, prayer must come first! “Prayer is the first breath of a Christian” (Luther).

When God’s people pray, Pentecost is unleashed. After persecution, before proclamation was renewed, the apostles and disciples together raised a cry to the heavens. A second Pentecost of power ensued:

²³On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God . . . ³¹After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:23ff).

If the epicenter is Pentecost, there will be aftershocks throughout history. Unlike earth tremors, the aftershocks often gain in intensity and multiply in gospel power. A tectonic process was begun with prayer.

Another time, God’s people prayed through the night for their beloved apostle. Chains fell off, prison doors were flung open and city gates “opened by themselves”. A gospel tremor cracked the foundation of every heart:

⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him . . . ⁷Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists . . . ¹⁰They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it (Acts 12:5-10).

A similar episode occurred when Paul and Barnabas sang and prayed in the Philippian jail:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and

everyone's chains came loose (Acts 16:25, 26).

I made sure of my footing. I rode the moving crest – wave after wave: prayer then Word, prayer then Word, prayer then Word.

Epilogue

This experience happened to me in the mid 1990s while I was the church planting director for Mission to North America. My foundations for ministry were radically rearranged, perhaps you might say “laid waste”. I embarked on a journey of prayer. When my wife, Caron, and I planted a second church in Vancouver, we declared one priority: “We *will be* a praying church.” We decided on one litmus test: “*Are* we a praying church?”

Each year we have run twelve to twenty weeks of leader training in prayer. Over the years we have developed a workshop for leaders, “Prayer Boot camp: Workshop for Urban Mission”; a Bible study curriculum, “Seven Days of Prayer with Jesus”; and a prayer pocketbook, “Journey in Prayer: Learning to Pray the Prayer of Jesus”. We have traveled to cities in North America and England to train leaders in this apostolic pattern of prayer. We are in the midst of teaching and promoting prayer for leaders, churches and seekers through an integrated web, blog, twitter and email strategy. Please pray for us. We believe we are doing the Lord's work. Our Christ promises, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations!”