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Corporate Prayer

by T. Austin-Sparks

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While it is true that a very large place is given in the Bible to individual and personal prayer, it is also true that a very great value is put upon corporate prayer. Indeed, a value is given to corporate prayer which cannot be known in individual prayer. In the New Testament the prayer-meeting has a very vital place in relation to the people and the work of God. It can be rightly said that the prayer-gathering is the index and register of the church's life. Show us your prayer-gathering and let us hear how the believers pray, and we will tell you what kind of church that is.

But what is church-prayer? In other words,

What Should The Prayer-Meeting Be?

It may seem a truism to say that it should be

(1) The Church AT PRAYER.

That is, the church as an entity, a corporate entity. Such a gathering together should be the solid expression of the organic oneness and spiritual unity of the local company of believers. The mere congregating of a number of individuals without an organic integration, and with so many personal interests to express or have expressed, may have values and would be better than nothing at all, but it would not be the solid and effectual prayer of the church as an entity.

There is a history behind the prayer of the church, as such. It is the history of a work of the Cross in which each member has been brought on to the ground of identification with Christ in death, burial,

and resurrection, and by that common history has identical life and fellowship. Such a church has *gone through* something in experience and that something has become subjective.

If two people have gone through a similar experience which has deeply affected their inward life, they have a mutuality of understanding, and they can speak with one voice. So it was in the prayer-life of the New Testament churches. They shared and expressed locally what was fundamentally true of the Church universal. It was a crucified and resurrected Church, having been baptized into the sufferings and victory of its Head. That victory should be inherited by the local church, and be manifested in the effective working and issues of its corporate prayer.

There, in the gatherings - or coming together - for prayer, the very nature and vocation of the Church universal should be in expression. Its nature is that of a spiritual organism because it has been born "not of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God", "born of the Spirit". Its vocation is to express the greatness, the rights, and the authority of Christ. Prayer is essentially vocational, and this is pre-eminently so in corporate prayer.

Vital relatedness, both of the persons and of the prayer, is indispensable to effectual prayer. How easy it is for someone to come in with something quite discordant or irrelevant, and so swing the prayer away from its strength of purpose and positiveness.

While many particular matters may occupy the foreground of required prayer, there should always be a looking beyond the thing itself to how it really relates to and touches those three factors just mentioned - the greatness, the rights, and the authority of Christ. We must have an adequate case in our prayer, and that is the Lord's glory.

(2) Corporate Prayer Must BE AUTHORITATIVE

The church at prayer must be on the ground of absolute authority. It must not be in doubt, uncertainty, or weakness, but in assurance and confidence. There must be the ground of authoritative appeal to God. There must be the ground of authority over the evil forces at work in any given situation. The church must have the assured right in its position and in its intercession.

That right and authority is respectively the infinite virtue and efficacy of the Blood of Christ and its testimony, and the Name of Christ as above every other name.

The church - at all times, but - especially when at prayer must be consistent with all that the Blood of Christ means as a testimony against sin, condemnation, and death. These things mean a closed door to Heaven and God. The Blood of Christ has for ever been the ground, and the only ground, of "the new and living way" to the Throne of Grace. The Name of Christ is the very synonym for supreme authority. *But* even so, it is not just a title, but the embodiment of a nature wholly satisfying to God; of a work perfectly accomplished; and of a position fully accorded Him. These are the elements of authority, and the ground of authoritative prayer. On this ground the church has a right to pray and expect. It can do more than ask upward; it can challenge outward - "in the Name."

(3) Corporate Prayer Should BE EXECUTIVE

When we use the word 'executive' we mean decisive. If you were a member of an executive body in any business concern, you would be a person marked by certain features, that is, if the concern with which you were connected was of a really vital character.

(a) You would be recognized as a person with a real business mind. That concern would give a seriousness to your demeanor and attitude. It would rule out diffusiveness and irrelevance, and knit you together with your colleagues as one with an integrating objective.

(b) You would be a person who would be marked by a will for decisions. Wasting of time; indecision; tentativeness; carelessness; and all such things would greatly disturb and trouble you. Your soul would be saying, 'Don't let us be always and only talking about things; waiting for something to happen, and hoping that it will, some day. Let us *be* executive, and have issues settled, and conclusions reached. Let there be an element of decisiveness and conclusiveness about our transactions. Let us reach for and be set upon a verdict.' Surely, such features are traceable in the prayers in the Bible, with Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah, etc., and in the New Testament Church and churches!

Our praying in meetings is all too tentative and indecisive. We do not really go out for a verdict. We stop before we have the assurance that we are *through* on that issue. There is such a thing as taking as well as asking. We ought to go away, not wondering, to say nothing of forgetting, but rather expecting and looking for Heaven's answer. That answer ought to be already in our hearts. If what we have said is true of any Executive worthy of the name, who has a serious Concern to serve, should it be less or otherwise with the church which has the greatest of all interests to serve, responsibilities to carry, and Name to honour? We should not go to the place and time of prayer just because it is 'prayer-meeting night'; or to do our duty to our 'church', or for conscience sake; certainly not to give certain others the occasion to pray while we listen and - more or less - agree. We *are* the church. We *are* in the greatest of all business! We should go thus-minded and with 'purpose of heart' determined to co-operate and - so help us God - to have outstanding, urgent issues settled for 'the sake of the Name'. On arriving our instant action should be to take the right ground and ask fervently that all should be taken into the hands of the Holy Spirit. One word remains for this present.

(4) Corporate Prayer Must BE COMBATIVE

It is impressive that in that part of the greatest *Church* letter in the New Testament where its militant character is emphasized and its armor portrayed, the Apostle gives such a definite place to prayer (Eph. 6).

There is nothing which draws out the "wiles" of the evil powers so much as corporate prayer. Everything is done to smother, blanket, confuse, divert, pre-occupy, disturb, distract, annoy, hinder, weary, waste time, and many other things, all with the object to see that there is no real impact of Christ's authority upon their kingdom.

If we realize this we shall 'gird up the loins of our minds', we shall 'stand and withstand'. Being alive to what is involved and what is happening, we can be no more passive than a soldier could be if he saw his country's interests and his comrades' lives involved in his attitude and action.

There is a real combativeness in corporate prayer, and we shall not get anywhere if our fighting spirit - not in the flesh, but in the Holy Spirit - has been let go or taken from us.