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REVOLUTION

A CALL FOR A REVOLUTION IN CORPORATE PRAYER

We live in an instant age. We are constantly connected and instantly updated. If my phone doesn't start an app in a just a few seconds I wonder what's going wrong. We don't like waiting because we're busy people after all. Change (especially in other people) should happen quickly and so on and so on. The western world is not a very patient place. So when I use the word revolution, it can too easily conjure up the image of something that is happening very quickly. Yet even a brief (after all that may be all we have time for) look at the history books should tell us that revolutions happen over years not days, and certainly not hours, minutes or seconds. The French Revolution of the 18th century took twelve years. The American Revolution lasted eighteen. The Industrial

Revolution was as long as eighty years! Revolution that brings about a lasting and significant change can take years of investment and sacrifice.

All of which must seem quite a dramatic start for a book about prayer. But I am convinced that when it comes to corporate prayer – the act of the church praying together – what we need is a nothing short of a revolution.

There are many great books on prayer from many great heroes of the faith. However, most of them have their focus on the individual and often have in mind the individual praying alone. Not much has been written about corporate prayer (although I think that is starting to change), and yet when it comes to prayer the Bible has much to say about praying together.

In 2013 I was listening to Pete Grieg speak to a group of leaders I had gathered together. Pete is one of those guys I just mentioned – a hero of the faith who has written several great books on prayer. But Pete also knows a thing or two about corporate prayer. He has after all started a genuine prayer movement known as 24/7 Prayer that has been going for over twenty years now. As Pete was talking, he said:

Corporate worship in church life has been changed beyond recognition in the past 30 years through much energy and creativity. Imagine what corporate prayer in church life would look like now if the same attention had been given to that.¹

I was so impacted by this statement. I could not stop thinking about it. I still haven't. So much so that I decided that as far as it depended on me, I would try to become part of the solution and not remain part of the problem. I was a worship leader in my early days as a leader and I can recall the dramatic and exciting exploration of corporate worship. It fuelled my imagination that such a journey with corporate prayer might also be possible.

Not only do we live in an impatient age, we live in an individual age. Individualism is a cultural preference where the desires of an individual are favoured over the collective needs. It pushes people towards self-reliance and independence. This affects people's spiritual growth and so we see much focus on

¹ Pete Greig, 'Forum 2013' – transcribed from *Relational Mission* recording.

self-help, self-improvement and personal development. This is as true inside the church as outside of it. For all the good it may do, it's not without its blind spots, weaknesses and dangers.

On paying closer attention to the teaching of the New Testament including those parts concerning prayer we see that it has a corporate context in mind. If you more easily think “how does this apply to me?” and not “how does this apply to *us*?” then you are thinking individually not corporately. If that happens a lot then we are in danger of losing vital aspects of biblical practice surrounding prayer. We need to strengthen our ideas about the very identity and nature of the church as the family, the people, the temple, the nation of God. The Bible anticipates that most of our Christian life will inevitably be worked out and filled out in a corporate context. With this in mind, mature, corporate prayer, specifically in the life of God's people, becomes something to prize and pursue.

As I reflect on my Christian life, many of the most significant events that I can recall are those that had corporate prayer at their core. In my early years as a Christian, the prayer meeting in my local church was the engine room of all that

God did. For many years the UK churches in what was known at the time as Newfrontiers, gathered three times a year for two days of prayer and fasting. I am convinced this was the engine room for all the remarkable things we saw God do over several decades. I remain convinced that when God's people pray it unleashes the resources of heaven upon earth in ways simply nothing else can do.

So how can we as churches living in an impatient and individualistic world invest in this revolution of prayer together?

GOING UP A DISTANCE

I was privileged to see the Olympic and World champion Mo Farah run his last middle-distance race. After this race he was going up a distance, into marathon racing. To do this he changed his routines, his training, his perspective and his goals. Even his middle-distance identity was something he was keen to redefine for the future journey ahead. It made me think that the church in the West needs to go 'up a distance' on corporate prayer. Our brothers and sisters in the Global South and East are far more able and well-trained than us in

corporate prayer and we need to humbly learn from them. We need to apply ourselves to changing our dynamic of prayer in just the same diligent and sustained way Mo Farah applied himself to changing his running distance.

There are several important steps to take. Firstly, we need to rescue prayer from being a department or specialism. Too often prayer and intercession has come to be seen as a gift that only some people have. You know, those very proficient praying people who seem to thrive in prayer meetings, the ones people talk about as “intercessors” or “prayer warriors”.

There is no gift of an intercessor in the Bible. There is however an activity of intercession which is for the whole church to engage in. Prayer is part of the inheritance of all believers – praying together is how we should live as believers.

In the family of churches that I lead we have begun over the past few years to invest in praying together, not just as a church but as groups of churches. Three times a year we would gather as many people as possible to pray on the same night, for the

same things.² To engage as many people as possible we deliberately set the bar at a height everyone can jump over. We have worked hard to make it easy for anyone who follows Christ to come along and feel engaged enjoyment in praying together with others.

It's not news to say that the Church in the West is struggling. There is a pulse, but in many places it's a pretty weak one. A lot has been and will be said into investigating the cause of the problem and in proposing solutions to restore the patient to health. I, like many others, read the book of Acts to see what we can learn from how the apostles and the early church got things started.

The apostles, faced with exponential growth, still remained convinced that they should “give [their] attention to prayer and the ministry of the word”.³ The apostles had an awareness of the effectiveness of these key components and the utterly

² We called these prayer gatherings ‘*Enough*’ to state both that God is enough for us and that there are issues and injustices in our world that we have had enough of. I’ll explain more about *Enough* throughout this book.

³ Acts 6:4 (NIV).

overwhelming task ahead that was faced without them. So I have two key, simple proposals that need to happen for the church in the West to return to health and vitality. First, everyone needs to be a witness for Christ, through words, works and wonders. Second, everyone needs to give him or herself to corporate prayer. When both of these things become a culture, a lifestyle such that they become a “contagion” as they did in late-18th century Britain,⁴ then I believe we will see a wave of church planting as a result of the numbers of people coming to Christ.

Unfortunately I also observe that these two simple but vital things are probably the weakest aspects of the western Church.

I do not consider myself to be an expert on prayer. I would not even say I am very good at prayer. I have an appetite for it, and I give myself to it as best as I can but I often lose concentration; I feel my words do not do justice to the task. I am tired easily in it. Yet I want to be on a journey with others so that together we can do things we could never otherwise do.

⁴ S Pearce Carey, M.A., *William Carey, D.D. Fellow of Linnean Society* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923). p. 14.

I want to reach for things we had not considered possible and I have found that when I pray with others I can do better, reach higher, concentrate for longer, find words and “amen” others’ prayers in a way that would simply not be possible if I were on my own.

I want corporate prayer to be accessible to all, to make it as easy as possible for people to pray. If it takes me, a fellow struggler, to be real and say, “Come on, folks, we can do this together, we really can, let’s help each other” then maybe just maybe movement can occur.

There are several challenges, to any follower of Christ, to getting meaningfully engaged in the corporate prayer life of the local church, one of them being: “What difference has this made?” That’s understandable, I get that. If I cook a meal, wash a car, build some furniture, paint a picture or a fence, I can almost immediately look at what I have been engaged in doing and see progress, accomplishment, achievement; fruitfulness even. Prayer is different.

Prayer often deals with unseen things and it requires eyes of faith to see what is going on. I think of a steam engine. Putting wood and coal on the fire does not immediately produce the

steam that moves the engine forward. But sure enough, given repeated investment in the effort of putting more and more fuel on the fire, eventually a head of steam is built up that can move a massive hunk of steel and iron forward in a way almost unimaginable at the time of stoking the fire. Prayer does the same thing. There is a process in play before the outcome is seen; the point being that our simple words are not empty of power, they have an effect. They stir heaven into action.

To help us grasp and more fully understand these unseen realities, I have made deliberate use of imagery in each chapter. Prayer is a difficult concept to convey with words alone and so pictures and images can help. I recall being greatly impacted by an image Charles Spurgeon used of our attempts to fully understand and articulate the love of Christ for us. Spurgeon, when preaching on 30 January 1859, said:

None of us have ever fully comprehended the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. Philosophers have probed the earth to its very center, threaded the spheres, measured the skies, weighed the hills—nay, weighed the world itself; but this is one of those vast, boundless things, which to measure doth surpass all but the Infinite itself.

As the swallow but skimmeth the water, and diveth not into its depths, so all the descriptions of the preacher but skim the surface, while depths immeasurable must lie far beneath our observation.⁵

I found his image of the swallow skimming the water so helpful in visualising the scale of our smallness of knowledge. So with prayer I am trying to help us see images that illustrate more than what might otherwise be conveyed through words. The soil of the heart and emotions need to be stirred for the seed of prayer to take root securely and be well watered.

My hope from this little book, is to encourage and stir further hunger for prayer as widely as possible in the Church. As Spurgeon, once again, encouraged his listeners to respond with a similar urgency:

Say to your minister, ‘Sir, we must have more prayer.’ Urge the people to more prayer. Have a prayer meeting, even if you have it all to yourself; and if you are asked how many were present, you can say, ‘Four’. ‘Four, how

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, ‘The Shameful Sufferer’, 30 January 1859
www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-shameful-sufferer#flipbook/

so?’ ‘Why, there was myself, and God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; and we have had a rich and real communion together’. We must have an outpouring of real devotion, or else what is to become of many of our churches:⁶

So I hope that by the time you reach the end of this short book, you would be willing to be a part of this revolution, knowing that the fruit of your prayers and efforts might not be seen in your lifetime but knowing that this investment will produce lasting and significant change.

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, ‘Paul’s First Prayer’, 25 March 1855
www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/pauls-first-prayer#flipbook/