

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 4:31; 6:4      “A Church with Prayerful Dependence”

Intro. The first transformational church was the first church in existence, the Jerusalem church. What a transformational impact they had! They spent ten days in prayer and when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost 3,000 souls were saved! (Acts 2:41). God worked miracles in their midst. In the following weeks thousands more openly confessed their faith in Jesus (Acts 4:4). They ministered to the poor (Acts 2:45; 4:35). Clearly, Jerusalem was impacted by the presence of this church.

In the Scriptures that I just read to you we see one of the main reasons the Jerusalem church had such power. They were a praying church. Their dependence upon God was expressed through their frequent prayers. The authors of the book, *Transformational Church*<sup>1</sup> say this, “A prayerful dependence is evident in Transformational Churches. These churches are humbly dependent on God for the vitality of the church” (p.125). Furthermore, prayer has always held a significant role in the church. This is especially true of times the church has experienced revival.

In 1986 Tabernacle Baptist Church in Lake City, Florida, was in the process of closing its doors for good. A Sunday night discussion of real revival led to a person volunteering his home for a prayer meeting the next night. A second person volunteered to host a Tuesday night prayer meeting. God moved in the lives of people in incredible ways. The first Monday night a young girl received Christ. Every night people would begin their story with the words “You are not going to believe what God did.” The revival moved to Sunday mornings. Pastor Mike Norman kept a journal over eighteen months. During this period attendance and offerings tripled. Prayer is indeed the engine of Transformational Churches.

So this morning we are going to be challenged by Scripture and by our *Transformational Church* book to strengthen the prayer ministry of our church. This is so important in becoming a transformational church. After all, in order to see transformation occur in a person, church, or community, God must be involved. And prayer is the key to seeing God work.

Before we begin, I want to give our authors’ definition of prayer. They wrote, “We would define prayer simply as the volitional response of a person to listen and speak to God about His work and character” (p.125). We should praise His character and join Him in His work through prayer. They also indicated that “prayer ... [is] a relationship born out of love for God” (p.140).

I want to begin this message about prayer by calling your attention to:

## I. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Let’s look again at those Scriptures in the book of Acts and draw some lessons about prayer based on the practices of the early church:

A. There Should Be Significant Participation in Prayer – In Acts 1:13 we read the names of the apostles, and then in v.14 we read, “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.” Who was it

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010), 125.

that was praying? Of course, the apostles were leading the prayer meeting. But we also read that women were there praying as well as the family of Jesus. Now we know from v.15 that as many as 120 attended these prayer meetings. This was basically everyone in Jerusalem who was willing to openly identify as a believer in Jesus at this time.

Significant participation in prayer continued in chapter 2. In v.42 we read that the early church “continued steadfastly ... in prayers.” The word translated “continued steadfastly” (*proskartereo*) came to mean steadfast continuance, to be devoted to something. Only those who are devoted to prayer, who make it a priority, will participate in prayer as they should. It seems evident that they were devoted to seasons of prayer in which believers had separate prayer meetings in one of the areas of the temple courts, including the regular times of prayer. In the original language the definite article, “the prayers” gives support to the belief that they continued the Jewish practice of having regular times of prayer 3 times/day. Daniel prayed three times a day. The Psalmist declared, “Evening, and morning and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and He shall hear my voice” (Psa. 55:17). And so there were three times when the Jews gathered in the temple to pray: at 9:00 in the morning, at 12:00 noon, and then at the ninth hour - 3:00 in the afternoon. We see an example of that in chapter 3, v.1 that I read to you at the beginning. Peter and John went to the Temple to pray during the 3 PM designated prayer time.

I believe the early church was taking their cue from Jesus. There are very few times that Scripture records that Jesus became angry. One of those times was when the Jewish leadership agreed to turn the temple court of the Gentiles into a marketplace. After overturning tables and driving out the merchants, He said in Mt. 21:13, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’” The court of the Gentile should have allowed room for Gentiles to come and pray unto the one true God. But there was hardly room. The point is that the gathering place for God’s people should be known as “a house of prayer” and our prayer and worship gatherings should be open for “all people.” When Christians assemble, they should pray. That is a priority. There must be public prayer with the entire body, prayer in groups, and individual prayer. Nothing is more important than God’s people praying.

Rainer and Stetzer found in their research that “prayer groups, prayer vigils, prayer rooms, and prayer events happened consistently in Transformational Churches” (p.132). So there was significant participation in prayer in these churches.

Prayer is the Christian thing to do. But how many Christians really pray as they should? How many churches really pray as they should? You will really do better in your personal prayer life, and in your church’s prayer life, if you commit to praying at regular times. My main time of daily prayer is in the morning after my daily quiet time of reading God’s Word. Our church has set aside Wednesday night as a time when we give more significant attention to prayer. We have a weekly Friday morning prayer time when 6-9 of us gather for prayer. Are you committed to prayer? We do not have much participation in our officially scheduled prayer meetings on Wednesday night and Friday morning. Out of 215 *active* members we have been averaging no more than 35 each week. Yet I realize that prayer takes place also in our Sunday school classes and in other small groups, including committee meetings and service groups. 79% of those in transformational churches agreed with this statement, “Those who serve in our church spend time in prayer before serving together.” Is that true of your service group?

There are also some examples of spontaneous prayer during the times we gather. 73% of those surveyed in Transformational Churches agreed with this statement, “Seeing people praying together is a normal sight at our church.” You have probably seen Eddie Martin pull someone aside to ask him or her to pray with him. He will be happy to pray for you! One idea that I read

in our book is the church that had prayer teams available for people at the conclusion of their worship services to pray with people who requested prayer (p.127).

I hope our weekly gatherings are a catalyst for prayer. 83% of members of transformational churches agreed with this statement, “Attending my church causes me to want to pray more in my personal life” (p.143). Church environments that cause people to pray consistently are the type churches that experience answers to prayer, and have greater participation in prayer.

B. There Should Be Unity in Prayer – In v.14 we read, “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication...” Note that they were in “one accord.” The word (*homothumadon*) refers to being of the same mind or spirit. All were intent on spending time in prayer. There was an unanimity of purpose, feeling, and desire. As a result, there were no schisms in this group; they were in complete accord and perfect unity. I should also add that unity is a condition of answered prayer. Jesus said in Mt. 18:19, “Again I say to you that if two of you agree (*sumphoneo*) on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”

Another example is found in Acts chapter 4. The apostles had been arrested and after they were threatened with punishment and let go, they gathered with the church to report what happened and to pray. In v.24 we read, “...they raised their voice to God with one accord...”

Unity is important for effective prayer, but I will say also that praying together promotes unity. When people pray together, it creates a bond of unity like nothing else. That is one reason why husbands and wives should pray together, and why families should pray together, and why church leaders should pray together. Our deacons begin each meeting with a season of prayer.

We see a great illustration of this in chapter 3. In v.1 we read, “Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” What a picture of what Christ can do! Before the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter and John were always at odds with each other. They were very different from each other. Peter was impulsive. He was always speaking out of turn. I can just see John rolling his eyes just about every time Peter spoke up. Peter was a man’s man. But John evidently was the quite type. He was reflective. He didn’t like Peter. But Christ can make the difference. So now, they are walking and praying and working together.

Isn’t it a wonderful thing how Jesus can use prayer to bring believers together in the name of Jesus Christ? If we are going to minister to a hurting world, we need to be unified in each local church.

C. Prayer Should Be a Priority – The Jerusalem church had been growing and the apostles became increasingly involved in benevolent work. That is important, but others could take care of feed the poor. So the apostles determined that they should refocus their ministries back to what should be their priorities. We see this expressed in Acts 6:4, “but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” It may be significant that prayer precedes the ministry of the Word. It would appear that prayer is the highest priority. You see, preaching and teaching without prayer is hardly more than an effort of strictly human origin. Jesus Himself spent much time in prayer. Eph. 6:18 that we should be “praying always...”

Notice what happened when they once again made prayer and the ministry of the Word their priority. It says in v.7, “Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” Even many of the Jewish priests were converted! The early church was having an even greater impact

on the city of Jerusalem. God has indeed chosen prayer to be a vehicle by which He changes people and the world (p.134).

D. We Should Exalt God in Prayer – Look again back in chapter 4, the last of v.24, and notice how they addressed God as they were facing a significant problem, “Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them.” They were facing the power of the ruling authorities, who had recently condemned Jesus to death, and were threatening to punish them for preaching about Jesus. Yet in prayer they chose to focus their attention on how powerful God is. He “made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them.” He made heaven, which includes the heavens we see at night. Someone has estimated that there are 1 billion trillion stars observable in the universe.<sup>2</sup> Do you realize how much power it took to create trillions and trillions of stars, most of which have more power than our sun? Here is an important principle: When you’ve got a problem, remember always that God is greater than your problem. Furthermore, on this particular occasion, they did not address God as “Father.” Instead, they addressed Him as “Lord” in v.24. But this is not the usual word for “Lord” (*kurios*), but it is the word which has been transliterated into English by the word “despot” (*despotes*). It refers to a ruler who has absolute control over his subjects. They prayed to a God who is in complete control of all things. The threats of these earthly rulers were no problem to the absolute Ruler of all mankind.

So let us always begin prayer with a focus on God and His wonderful attributes, including His great power and love.

E. We Should Share Our Requests in Prayer – As they prayed, notice their requests in vv.29-30, “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” One important aspect of prayer is offering prayer requests. Phil. 4:6-7 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Instead of being overwhelmed by your problems, pray about your problems.

I like what Jim Cymbala said, “I have discovered an astonishing truth. God is attracted to weakness. He can’t resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him.”

I can assure you that God will respond to the prayers of His people. James 5:16 says, “...The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Well, God answered the prayer that was offered up in Acts 4. Look at v.31, “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” God gave them what they asked for. Here we see that prayer is the key to a powerful church!

Think of what could happen in our church if we prayed like we ought to? I wonder how many more people would be saved and come to know Christ as Savior? If we prayed like we should, we would have a far greater impact upon our community.

This reminds me of what happened during our last revival. Our evangelist Thomas Hatley knew about a prayer concern for one of my sons. During the invitation time he called upon those who so desired to come down front and pray with me and Cheryl for our son. Dozens came forward so that this whole area was full of people praying. Several voiced public prayers,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://scienceline.ucsb.edu/getkey.php?key=3775>

including Drew and Pat Porter. Tears were shed in passionate prayer. Do you know what happened when God's people prayed? One of our youth agreed to make a public profession of his faith after that prayer time. The next night, Thomas preached and at least 10 came forward to trust in Christ as Savior, some of whom are still active in our youth group. On top of all that God answered the prayer for my son. Great things can happen when God's people pray!

Now I want to share about the practice of prayer in the first church, but also share with you:

## II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PRAYING CHURCHES

I want to share some prayer principles from the *Transformational Church* book that characterized the transformational churches that they studied. What does a church deeply committed to prayer look like? Certain characteristics were consistent in these churches. I want to share the ones listed in the book that I haven't already covered:

A. Praying Churches Experience Breakthroughs – God responds to the kind of prayers that we have been talking about today with a spiritual breakthrough that is clearly of God.

Pastor Randall Smith of Vista Hills Church in El Paso, Texas, experienced a breakthrough initiated through prayer. Prayer teams began praying every night at the church facility. For three years and counting the people of Vista Hills Church have met and prayed every day for at least an hour. They pray for church leaders, direction of the church, and families in the church. Pastor Smith believes the result of praying has been transformational. The entire culture of the church has been changed. Prayer permeates all that they do.

Our church needs a breakthrough. We need a fresh work of God in our midst. We need revival. That is only going to happen through prayer.

B. Praying Churches Have Praying Leaders - The principle of modeling is a recurring theme in transformational churches. Those of us who are leaders have to model prayer in order to equip others in the church to be praying Christians.

So I am calling on all of our leaders to model prayer for and with others in the church.

C. Praying Churches Commonly Experience Answers to Prayer – We have already seen examples of that in the book of Acts. You see, prayer environments are marked by God's intervention. Stories of answered prayer are celebrated. God is glorified when answers to prayer are undeniable. Transformational leaders know stories are critical to fuel prayer movements in their churches.

This has led me to consider changing how we do prayer meetings. Instead of starting with prayer requests we should first ask our people to share answers to prayer. The stories do not have to be big, but they are significant when people hear what God is doing in response to praying. Yet if we have few stories to tell, I'm afraid that probably means we are not praying as we should.

D. Praying Churches Pray for Others by Name – The apostle Paul demonstrated a life committed to praying for other believers. He told the Ephesian Christians, "Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give

thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers” (1:15-16). I assume that he prayed for many of those new believers by name.

Often we pray for some of the sick on our prayer list by name, but we should also be praying for unbelievers by name, for our church leadership by name, for members of our S.S. classes by name, and so forth. Deacons, you should be praying for the families assigned to you by name. I have used the rolodex on my desk to pray for the entire congregation by name. And I ask you to pray for our Church Health Team by name, including our Pastors.

E. Praying Churches Have Systems and Processes – While prayer at times will be spontaneous, we also know that prayer is aided by having systems in place for the ongoing prayer ministry of the church. Transformational churches train new members to pray. They have means to inform members of prayer requests. They distribute prayer lists and prayer guides. One church has a prayer room with a large wall hanging where members can post prayer requests. We could set aside a prayer room in our church building.

We have to be careful that the process to encourage prayer is subservient to prayer itself. Too often we spend more time sharing prayer requests, giving so many details, that we spend more time doing that than praying!

A few months ago in our weekly pastoral staff meetings, we decided that we should not start off sharing prayer requests. There are only 3 of us. We can just include our prayer requests in our prayers since all of us participate in our prayer time. That gives us more time to pray!

For those of you who are on Facebook, I have just created a new group called, “Swift Creek Baptist Prayer Room.” It is a closed group. Only members of the group can see the prayer requests that are listed. If you join the group, you can add prayer requests, and you can pray over the names listed. I will send out an email address that will enable you to post prayer requests even if you are not on Facebook.

F. Praying Churches Engage Their Communities through Prayer - Churches that regularly display their dependence on God through prayer are more likely to act according to His heart and join Him in His work.

Some churches engage their community through prayer walking, looking for opportunities to connect with people in neighborhoods, offering to pray for them. Some churches have special prayer gatherings for those serving in the community, such as educators, political leaders, police officers, and firefighters. Pastor Rob Watts leads the membership of West Columbus Church of God in Columbus, Ohio, to engage neighborhoods through prayer. He recently led them to take nine-volt batteries door-to-door offering to change out the batteries in their neighbor’s smoke detectors. As they left, they asked their neighbors if they had anything they could pray about. I believe that church is having an impact!

We as a church need to do more to engage our community with prayer. On April 1 we plan to host a meal for area police officers, and you can be sure we will have a special prayer for them. Yet we need to do more.

G. Praying Churches Have Big Prayer Events – This may include an occasional all-day prayer meeting or other special prayer event with a specific prayer focus. One of the valuable by-products of the event is that new attendees see a vivid demonstration of how important prayer is to the life of the church. Special events communicate what is special to a church!

Conclusion: Prayer leaders agree that we are missing our most significant resource when we neglect the spiritual discipline of prayer. We live in an age where we have so many other methods or activities to resort to besides prayer. There are ways to get a large crowd without God being involved at all! Yet to see God work in transforming lives we must pray much more like the early church did, and the way transformational churches do. Where people pray, God works. Where God works, transformation happens.

Our authors close their chapter on prayer with a quote by Leonard Ravenhill, who wrote much about prayer and revival. He said, “We have many organizers, but few agonizers; many players and payers, few prayers; many singers, few clingers; lots of pastors, few wrestlers; many fears, few tears; much fashion, little passion.... Failing here, we fail everywhere.” If we fail to pray as we should, we will fail in every other aspect of the life of our church. Let’s make a renewed commitment to pray the way we have talked about today!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *How to Handle Persecution: Study Notes on Acts 4:1-32, 8:1-8, 16:19-40* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010); W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on Acts 1:13-14). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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