

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE PRAYER MEETING?

“After 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 4:31

During a recent mission trip to Zambia I witnessed a most extraordinary response to this challenge of: Whatever Happened to the Prayer Meeting?

It was my first meeting of our mission trip. The venue was The Bible Gospel Church in Africa – Holy Ghost Centre - in Matero, Lusaka. Seven years before this building had been a beer hall. Bishop Peter Ndhlovu had brought so many people to the Lord that he was able to convert this beer hall into a Bible Church. We had been invited to conduct a *Christian Action Network Fire of God Conference* in Lusaka. The response to the challenge was quite extraordinary. Bishop Ndhlovu informed the members of his congregation that they would be holding an all-night Prayer Meeting the very next Friday!

On Sunday morning I found the congregation most receptive and enthusiastic for my message on Personal Revival. Immediately following the sermon the congregation spontaneously erupted into prayer and for a long time people were earnestly seeking the Lord with hands raised or on their knees, pouring out their hearts before the Lord. It was precious time of worship *“in Spirit and in Truth.”*

On Friday night the atmosphere in the church was electric. As we began the all-night prayer vigil the people erupted in enthusiastic intercession.

It reminded me of the beginnings of our mission. Frontline Fellowship was born in prayer. The vision for our mission – to assist persecuted churches, evangelising in war zones and serving in restricted access areas – grew out of the daily Bible Study and Prayer Meeting, which I led during my time of military service. For two years we met, almost every night, around the Word of God, spending extended times in prayer. Sometimes we prayed through the night, in prayer chains. Often our Bible Study and Prayer Meetings lasted for three, four or five hours at a time.

For centuries the prayer meeting was a central part of church life, an indispensable part of the weekly programme. Yet today few Western churches have a prayer meeting.

What was once a major emphasis of church activities has either been relegated to the sidelines and ignored by most members, or it has been dispensed with altogether. Furthermore many prayer meetings today involve little prayer. Even in meetings set aside for prayer, other activities typically crowd in and leave little time for adoration, confession, intercession and thanksgiving to the Lord. We need to ask ourselves: **Why is that?**

When I was converted, over 30 years ago, my local church had a dynamic men’s meeting, prayer meeting and outreach evening each week. However, television had been introduced into South Africa the previous year and was beginning to encroach upon the church’s activities. The men’s meeting was *“temporarily suspended”* because it clashed with *“Rich Man, Poor Man”*, a popular weekly TV programme. (Actually the men’s meeting never reconvened).

The weekly door-to-door outreach was also suspended, because it clashed with many people’s TV viewing. The prayer meeting became a special gathering for a few dedicated members rather than the weekly activity of most members. It appeared that in the daily demands and time pressures, prayer and evangelism were expendable.

One would have thought that the church had few greater priorities than our relationship to God in prayer and reaching out in evangelism to our neighbour. But then I remember in one of the first church member meetings I attended that while improving the church's acoustics at the cost of R4,000 was approved, it was agreed that the monthly support of the church's missionaries could not be increased and would stay at R100. Evidently missions wasn't as high a priority as music.

On one of my first mission trips behind the Iron Curtain to Eastern Europe, one of our persecuted brothers, Dr. Paul Negrut, explained how they were able to recognise true believers, and identify informers planted by the Communist government: *"A real Christian loves God, a real Christian loves to read the Bible. A real Christian loves to pray. And a real Christian hates sin."* Then Pastor Paul added: *"We don't count our members by how many attend the Sunday service, but by who attends the Bible study and prayer meeting."*

By that standard: **how many real Christians and true members do we have?**

A hunger for God's Word and a desire to pray are some of the first evidences of the new birth. I remember as a new Christian spending hours each day in Bible study and prayer. In the army and in the early years of this mission we spent whole nights in prayer. It was completely natural and thoroughly enjoyable as we poured out our hearts to God in prayer. And evangelism naturally flowed out of our times of intercession. The more of God's Word we studied the more we wanted to pray. The more we prayed the greater our compulsion to share the Gospel with the unsaved around us.

This is what the early church experienced. As they laboured in intensive, heartfelt prayer, they were fitted with the Holy Spirit. Then they went out and proclaimed God's Word boldly (Acts 4:31).

The Church is called to be *"a House of prayer for all nations"*. Intercession, evangelism and missions should be an indispensable part of every congregation.

The prophet Samuel described prayerlessness as a sin (1 Samuel 12:23). The Reformer John Knox prayed: *"Give me Scotland or I die!"* No wonder Mary Queen of Scots declared that she was more afraid of the prayers of John Knox than of an army of ten thousand. The Bible places great emphasis on prayer:

"Pray continually" 1 Thessalonians 5:19

"Look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always." 1 Chronicles 16:11

"You will seek Me and you will find Me, where you search for Me with all your heart."
Jeremiah 29:13

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Matthew 26:41

"Then Jesus told His disciples...that they should always pray and not give up." Luke 18:1

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Matthew 7:7

"All this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favour of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to Your truth." Daniel 9:13

Prayerlessness is a root sin. To reverse this disastrous trend we need to give attention to the Word of God, study the Scriptures, pray the Psalms, turn from our sins, and seek the Lord.

“If My people, who are called according to My Name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from Heaven, I will forgive their sin and I will heal their land.” 2 Chronicles 7:14

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests... be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” Ephesians 6:18

If you're too busy to pray then you're busier than God wants you to be. There's nothing beyond the reach of prayer except that which is outside the will of God.

“If you abide in Me and My Words abide in you then you will ask whatever you want of Me and it shall be given to you.” John 15:7

Dr. Peter Hammond
Frontline Fellowship
P.O. Box 74 Newlands 7725
Cape Town South Africa
Tel: 021-689-4480
Email: mission@frontline.org.za
Website: www.frontline.org.za

