

Transformational Prayer

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Is it just me, or have you also noticed that people are increasingly on a mission to change our thinking and behavior these days? Apparently it is the newest way to affirm life... or discover purpose. Activists and mavens are seemingly everywhere. Pulling out their digital soapboxes, they urge us to use less energy, support gay marriage, distrust authority, and buy E-books.

Where the proposition involves adopting new technology, the sell can be relatively easy — assuming we are not put off by operational complexity or a high price point. This is because most of us have tasted the benefits of inventiveness. We *want* shiny new gadgets that will make our lives easier and more enjoyable.

But when the proposed change concerns an area where current experience and practice feel right to us (or at least adequate), the conversion process becomes markedly more difficult. In such situations, it is not enough to tell us we should change. We need to be told *why*.

Take prayer for example. Few common practices have been so roundly critiqued, while at the same time demonstrating such stalwart resistance to change. Many prayer leaders concede the movement's results have lately been less than stellar, and yet their proposed remedy is to recruit more believers to do what hasn't been working!

In the United States, organizers of a national prayer summit recently admitted that a declining national culture is stark evidence that “all that has been tried in the past is not working.” The proposed solution was to ask believers to join them in their “primary goal of connecting 100 million Christians online by 2016.”

On the surface, this appears to be a form of madness. What is the sense in urging more people to pursue something that even planners' concede has been a losing proposition?

The problem, however, is neither madness, nor failed leadership. By rallying more pray-ers to the cause, organizers are admitting that something needs to change. And rather than accepting or ignoring the status quo, they are calling for a response.

For this, they are to be commended.

The problem is they are not really calling for change. They are calling for *escalation* — a strategy they have apparently come to view (evidence notwithstanding) as a novel approach.

Some Hard Questions

In point of fact, there are more people praying today than at any time in church history. What is more, they are coordinating their efforts in order to keep petitions before the Lord day and night. It is hard not to be impressed.

With all this momentum however comes an important caveat. At the end of the day, intercessory success is not a reflection of how many of us are praying... or for how long. Such numbers speak to effort, not *results*.

The only question that truly matters is, Are our prayers getting answered?

Some of them may be. But if we take an honest look at the big picture, it's hard to argue that we are generating any kind of breakthrough momentum.

On a global scale, corruption is pervasive, economies are failing, radical Islam is spreading, and violence against women and children is increasing. Add to this a growing number of tightly wound conflicts that have no obvious end.

Things are not much better on the national level where emboldened and militant atheists have taken increasing control of the public marketplace. On campuses, Christian student organizations are being portrayed as hate groups and denied access to facilities and services. The institution of marriage has been redefined to include unions between people of the same sex — with other voices clamoring for recognition of multiple-spouse arrangements. Pornography is exploding, ensnaring (in the U.S. at least) an estimated 54 percent of the nation's pastors.

And what of our local communities? This is where we should be observing the greatest impact from the prayer movement's increased numbers and hours. But where are the transformational stories that bear witness to the fact that our prayers are being answered?

Not long ago I received an email from of a large city-reaching fellowship in America. The group had been praying and strategizing for more than a decade, and now the leader wanted to know if anything was working. In an almost plaintive tone, he asked if I was aware of any transformational stories that could be shared.

Sadly, many churches do not accommodate testimony in their Sunday worship services. And in the few that do, we are more likely to hear people talking about what *they* are doing than about any great work of God.

But if God is not responding to our prayers, what are we to make of this? If we don't know, or can't know, if our prayers are being answered, then why do we continue praying?

Is this not an appropriate time for us to acknowledge that something is wrong with our approach to prayer?

Dr. Colin Peckham who, along with his wife Mary, was deeply involved with the Hebrides revival, put it this way:

“Many of us pray just enough to ease the conscience but not enough to win any decided victory. We play at praying. We put very little into it and therefore receive very little from it. As a consequence, our prayers are not a mighty force but a harmless conventionality.”

Transformational Prayer

Transformational prayer is not centered on how many of us are praying, or how long we pray. Rather, it is about *who* is praying... and *how* they pray.

In the first instance, I am increasingly persuaded that if we truly want to see transformational progress, we should spend less time praying (at least initially), and more time *preparing ourselves to be heard*.

In terms of *how* we pray, three things rise to the surface. Put briefly, we are to:

- Pray with specificity
- Within an urgent timeframe
- With an expectation of results

These elements comprise what Scripture and revivalists call prevailing or effectual prayer — meaning that it attains the blessing that it seeks. It is not a spiritual innovation, but rather a return to what worked before we adopted the notion that numbers matter more than heart condition.

After years of being viewed as an impractical, lightweight solution to societal ills, prayer is once again fashionable. That much is good. But fashions are ephemeral, and there is also reason to temper our rejoicing. Perhaps this renewed attention on prayer is simply a consequence of the abject failure of every other approach. Rather than championing prayer as a uniquely powerful tool, we instead view it as the last card in the deck... a last-ditch strategy.

How did we get here?

What happened to the confident, game-changing prayers of Moses, Elijah, and David? Where are the modern-day Rees Howells and George Müllers? How did our opinion of prayer fall so far so fast?

The short answer is that, in all-too-many instances, our prayers do not seem to be working. It is as if they are not even getting heard, let alone answered. There are minor victories of course, but nothing like that experienced by the aforementioned intercessors.

The reason I believe our prayer lives project more hope than confidence is that we are plagued by an underlying uncertainty about God's character and ways. In this uncertainty, we accommodate ourselves to theological abstraction, faithless petitions, and low expectations.

Thankfully, these under-achieving ways need not follow us. It is both possible, and essential, that we become societal change agents. For millions of our fellow citizens, time is running out. Within this urgent context we must begin to pray with specificity — and with an expectation of results.

Praying With Specificity

Many of us assume that when something positive happens it is a result of answered prayer. Unfortunately, we cannot be certain because our prayers lack detail. Maybe the positive developments simply reflect the law of averages — good things happen at least some of the time.

In Mark 11:24 Jesus says, "I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Here Jesus explicitly links prayer to faith. The reason that generalized or randomized prayers don't get answered is because there is no faith attached to them. With no specificity, there is nothing to attach the faith to.

Many people today go to their knees and pray for everything that floats into their imagination. But we cannot pray effectually for a variety of objects at once. Indeed, if we talked to others the way we talk to God, most people would assume that we needed medication or therapy.

And our penchant for generalized blanket prayers is just as crazy. Transformational prayer seeks a definite object. We are not to expect "something" or "anything." We are to expect the *particular thing* we desire.

"Now Elijah... said to Ahab, 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.'" [1 Kings 17:1; see also 18:41-45]

How could Elijah say such an audacious thing? Because, as James writes:

"Elijah (who was a man just like us) *prayed earnestly that it would not rain*, and it did not rain upon the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." [James 5:17]

In 2003, believers in Algodao de Jandaira, a Brazilian town that had not seen rain in over 25 years, prayed in similar fashion. When God responded by sending what the local mayor called "the flood of blessing," a dying community was transformed.

Three years earlier, intercessors in Cape Town, South Africa gathered in a local stadium to petition God for an end to terrorist bombings wracking the city. Their

specific request was that God would reveal the location of bomb-making laboratories to beleaguered authorities. When national newspapers trumpeted that very development the next morning, the people rejoiced.

Praying with specificity is the only way to pray in faith, and the only way we can determine with certainty that our prayers have been answered.

Praying Within An Urgent Timeframe

Another aspect of transformational prayer is that it is transacted within an urgent timeframe. When David was besieged by his enemies, he prayed

“Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.” [Psalm 70:1]

In Exodus 14, Moses cried out to the Lord as the armies of Pharaoh threatened to sweep them into the Red Sea. So urgent was the timeframe, that God cut off the prayer!

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on...’”

Often the need we are bringing before God is pressing. If he doesn’t respond within a matter of days, or even hours, we can simply stop praying — because it won’t matter anymore.

In situations like this, patient, open-ended intercession makes no sense. It is like soliciting bids from architects to build a supermarket in a neighborhood where everyone is starving to death. By the time we select a winning design, erect the structure, and stock it with food — our customers will all be dead.

Years ago, when my daughter’s life hung in the balance following a near drowning incident, the last thing I needed were the casual prayers of people who thought time was on their side.

How do we preach patience to the drug addict who is losing his health, his family, and his self respect? What is our argument to the little girl who is being sexually traumatized by a lascivious uncle? What does our promise of a bright tomorrow mean for citizens that are being fleeced by corrupt businesses or politicians?

Living with this kind of dysfunction is analogous to living in a house where the toilet is overflowing. Yet instead of being dismayed by the situation, we accept it as normal!

But the longer we take to prepare the way of the Lord, the greater the price our community will pay.

Praying With An Expectation Of Results

To pray transformationally is also to pray with an expectation of results. This is how Jesus prayed. This is how the early church prayed. And frankly, it is the only kind of prayer that makes sense.

In the words of Scottish revivalist Duncan Campbell, “Desire for revival is one thing, confident anticipation that our desire will be fulfilled is another.”

A remarkable example of this is found in the life of Hector McKennon, a postman on the tiny island of Berneray in the Scottish Hebrides. In April 1952, desperate for revival, he retreated to his barn where he spent an entire day petitioning God to send Duncan Campbell to the island.

About ten o'clock that evening God assured Mr. McKennon that his servant would arrive on the island on a particular day — despite the fact the two men had never met or spoken. Armed with this conviction, the godly postman set up church meetings and made arrangements for Mr. Campbell's accommodation.

At that same moment, Duncan Campbell was preparing to address a large convention in Northern Ireland when he was suddenly gripped by the conviction that he had to depart immediately for Berneray.

When he arrived two days later, a young lad informed him: “Hector McKennon was expecting you to arrive today. He asked me to tell you that he has initiated a meeting at nine o'clock tonight and he expects you to address it.”

Within hours, a mighty visitation shook the Island from center to circumference.

Praying without an expectation of results is tantamount to tossing coins into a wishing well. And this, as A.W. Tozer once said, “is to misunderstand the whole concept of prayer and relationship with God.”

“...let him [who prays] ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.” [James 1:5-6]