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Prayer and the Training of Christian Leadership

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Every Christian organization vitally concerned to further God's cause must recognize the importance prayer should have in the preparation of leaders. The purpose of this study is to present the nature of spiritual leadership and the centrality of prayer in the training of leaders who will exercise any influential role in the service of God.

J. Allen Thompson described his reaction to elevation to the directorship of his mission. 'That day I knelt in dedication . . . accepting God's appointment. I wept in desperation, a prayer of committal. Lord, you know my total inability for this task. You know I cannot emulate my godly father. I turn to you, now. I have no other course. Make me your instrument.'¹ Here the responsibility of Christian leadership and prayer intertwine in a vital way.² A humble disposition to lean rather than lead, a willingness nevertheless to become an institutional director, gladly submitting under the leadership of the church's supreme Head, is the heart of the matter. Such must be the controlling vision of all who wish to prepare a cadre of men and women for vital decision-making.

Surprisingly, there is a paucity of direct teaching about management skills or organizational structures in the New Testament. Consider the qualification of the first missionary team sent out in Acts. Both Barnabas and Saul were highly respected leaders, recognized by the Antioch church and commissioned by the Holy Spirit. Although it would undoubtedly be false to imagine specific steps that those pioneers took to acquire expertise in leadership, yet they met the four conditions that Chester I. Barnard sets out as necessary for the authority of leadership to be effective: 1) Understand the communication expressed by the director(s). 2) Make decisions that are consistent with the purpose of the organization. 3) Lead in a way compatible with personal interest. 4) Be able to comply with the orders given.³

More than fulfilling job descriptions and following management techniques, those key men were dedicated, wise, and sensitive to God's directions. Their decisions, characteristically, were made in the crucible of the presence of God. Prayer meant much more than ritual endorsement: rather it served as a vital link in the chain of command. They were sensitive to divine orders which they implemented with faithful submission. But when leaders fail, the tragedy reflects on God, for the cause is his. Multiple causality result, forming a kind of spiritual ripple effect, and reach out to the extremities of the radius of the leader's influence.

Modern business practices have confirmed for the world the importance of following newly discovered laws of efficient management.⁴ The consequences of making the right decisions are success, increased production, fame, and power. In the realm of the Spirit, such 'natural law' may well reveal the orderliness of God's person, but obscure the significance of prayer and trust.

Good management operates mechanically, demonstrating discernible laws of cause and effect. But prayer acts in a distinct dimension, the invisible world where God chalks up credits and debits often undetectable by any human evaluation. 'One of the gravest perils which besets the ministry is a restless scattering of energies over an amazing multiplicity of interests, which leaves no margin, time and strength for receptive and absorbing communion with God.'⁵ Leadership involves the exercise of

spiritual power. Prayer is God's ordered means of channeling his power (Mk. 11:23, 24; Jn. 14:12-14; 16:13,24). As no spiritual progress or victory can be expected without God's intervention, it behooves all who wish to serve him to learn the secret of receiving copious evidences of his power through intercession. Said the saintly Robert Hall, 'The prayer of faith is the only power in the universe to which the great Jehovah yields. Prayer is the sovereign remedy.'⁶

I. Qualifications of the Christian Leader

It would be easy to compile a long list of desirable qualities a Christian leader should possess, but the foremost prerequisite of anyone in authority is godliness. Without a heart that cleaves to God and seeks his glory as its highest ambition the leader will fall into the trap of prayerlessness and egocentricity. The person who has a very limited experience in getting things from God and a lukewarm heart for God will fail in the central aim which must undergird all service for God. 'The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart' (1 Sam. 13:14) is still true in this day of grace. Such was Count Zinzendorf, who confided, 'I have only one passion: it is He, He alone.'⁷ On the other hand, James reminds us that a wrong kind of praying will not be attended. The picture he paints describes the church as God's unfaithful wife. An 'adulteress' (Jas. 4:4) symbolizes anyone who begs from God the conditions to assure a high level of leadership, its omission certifies that the exercise of leadership will not be harmonious with God's will.

1. A leader who exercises authority makes decisions that affect the group he or she leads. For example, the pastor chooses goals and the means he believes will reach them. His vision and teaching gain approval by the congregation that chooses to follow him. When a pastor selects themes to preach on or subjects to converse about, his parishioners learn what their leader deems is essential in the Christian life. Clearly the pastoral leader not only proclaims his understanding of the message but also models it (cf. Phil. 3:17). The vital question is, are his choices and values rooted in Scripture while he humbly waits on God in prayer?

Paul underscores his role of leadership in his teaching on the gifts God gives the church (Eph. 4:11-12). Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teaching pastors are to concentrate primarily in preparation (*katartismos*) of saints.

Two kinds of service within the body of Christ are suggested by his term: (a) restoring those who fail (cf. repairing nets in Mt. 4:21), as in the case of the Galatians, where Paul limited the right to restore others to 'spiritual', i.e. godly, men;⁸ (b) training people in the church for ministry (*diakonia*).

If the privilege of directing is pressed upon leaders who are not characterized by prayer, the body will suffer spiritual anaemia. The stumbling members will not be restored (Gal. 6:1,2). The church will neither reach its divine destiny, nor arrive 'at the unity of the faith' and the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph. 4:13). The same hindrances to prayer are the barriers to a holy life.¹⁰ Logically, a church cannot be expected to surpass its leader in spiritual power and godliness, though it may.

2. The second important credential of the leader is a vision that reacts in a critical and challenging way to the status quo. Without a director who lifts his eyes beyond the urgent concerns of the moment, any organization will soon show the marks of death and decay. Such was Jesus' evaluation of those who 'have eyes ... but fail to see . . . have ears but fail to hear' (Mk. 8:18). Mathew relates Christ's last order to his adoring followers:

‘Teaching them [the disciples you make] to obey everything I have commanded you’ (Mt. 28:19,20). How would the church Jesus envisioned differ from the religious communities of the Pharisees and scribes? His scathing rebuke of these contemporary Jewish leaders grew out of his observation that they were abysmally unqualified to set the pace for God’s people: (a) They do not practice what they preach (Mt. 23:3). (b) They demand that others carry burdens they will not raise a finger to bear (v. 4). (c) They exalt themselves instead of choosing the path of self-abasement (Mt. 23:12).

3. The Christian leader must be tested and proven. Paul warns: ‘He [the overseer] must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil’ (1 Tim. 3:6). The privilege of teaching others should be consequent to proven faithfulness and capacity (2 Tim. 2:2). The Bible furnishes numerous examples. Outstanding among them are Moses and Paul who were not given the responsibility of governing others until they had spent long years in the school of faith, learning to know God: Moses in the back side of the desert and Paul in the Arabian wilderness and in ten years of obscure ministry before reappearing in the limelight (Gal. 1:17; Acts 9:30; 11:25). So too Christian leaders must face the crucible of human interrelationships, if they are to earn the privilege of wielding authority.

As an example of the way one denomination serving in Mexico confirms those who claim they have heard the call to Christian service, several steps are required to test the legitimacy of their vocation. a) For one year they are to witness in the streets, distributing tracts and evangelizing the lost. b) Once successfully beyond that hurdle they are encouraged to establish a regular preaching point. c) The third step requires working humbly under the pastor of a local church. d) If, after a year, the pastor willingly recommends the candidate’s matriculation, he is admitted to a pastors’ training course. e) After successful completion of the required course of study, questions must be correctly answered during a three-day interrogation in preparation for ordination. f) If the examining pastors think he is chosen of God to lead, he will be ordained to the gospel ministry.

4. Contrary to the general image of leadership, the person who God calls to administer his business must be both teachable and willing to serve. Foundational to the overseer’s good management of the home and worthy care (epimelestai) of the church of God (1 Tim. 3:5) is the stated requirement that he be able ‘to teach’. The epitome of wisdom can be found in the correct blend between conviction and openness. Although reluctant to accept God’s appointment, Moses served in faithful obedience. Such humble reluctance to take the awesome responsibility over the lives of others was not uncommon in outstanding biblical leaders.

To become a vessel equipped for the Master’s use demands, first of all, the surrender of the will. Certain anonymous Macedonians who ‘gave themselves first to the Lord’ (2 Cor. 8:5) acted in this way. Was Epaphroditus of Philippi one of these (Phil. 2:25-30)? Paul urged the church to ‘honor men like him’ (Phil 2:29).

Since power corrupts so frequently and thoroughly, the leader’s sole escape from the devil’s snare (1 Tim. 3:6) should be sought by walking in the sanctifying path of communion with God. From expression to God, to impression by God, to expression to fellow men,¹¹ is the essentially biblical way to acquire authority, spirituality, and a sacrificial spirit necessary to Christian leadership.¹² The one

who seeks to fill the role of a steward must first of all acknowledge total personal paralysis in the spiritual realm, apart from his Lord (Jn. 15:5).¹³ To believe that one can do anything apart from divine grace is to deny the Father's glory in the Son (Jn. 14:13) and its counterproductive to the kind of fruit the true vine produces (Jn. 15).

Genuine prayer cannot regularly bypass confession of sin which will in turn humble a leader before God and himself. If he omits prayer and shuns the mirror of God's Word, he will become increasingly enamored of his importance, a path which leads to insensitivity to spiritual reality.

He will be responsible for destructive changes in the organization or church. Failure to operate according to God's law results in following fallen human law (1 Cor. 3:3).¹⁴ Such a spiritual disaster occurred in Corinth. Anonymous leaders who commended themselves (2 Cor. 10:11) were able to rise to preeminence, but they divided the church into four parts. Their ambition motivated their fleshly practice of peddling God's word insincerely (2 Cor. 2:17). No doubt these people shunned real prayer. They led in the flesh and set their sight on its unspiritual goals (1 Cor. 3:3).

5. He who aspires to the responsibility of an overseer needs to ascertain if he can lay claim to the credentials of a leader like Stephen, 'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 6:5). True faith breeds confidence in leader and follower alike. Endued with a calm assurance of the Guide who has traveled the road before, he knows the vicissitudes of life are not assailing him by chance. Rather, they are indicators of divine testing (1 Pet. 1:7), God's school of wisdom. James suggests that when faith is tested, the child of God becomes aware of his or her deficiency in wisdom (Jas. 1:5).

Proven faith encourages prayer with assurances that God will generously supply what is lacking (1 Pet. 1:3-6). 'The faith that believes that God will do what you ask is not born in a hurry, it is not born in the dust of the street and the noise of the crowd. Its birthplace is in the secret place, and time, the open Word and a reverent heart are necessary to its growth. Into that heart will come a simple strong faith that the thing it is led to ask shall be accomplished'.¹⁵ Our Lord declared, 'Everything is possible for him who believes' (Mk. 9:23).

Such trust in God inspires followers to confide in their leader. His 'style' will have been forged in the interaction with a Father who disciplines and confirms his child through testing and personal intercommunion. No feats of mental gymnastics, no self-indoctrination in the art of positive thinking, no merely subjective, worked-up state, no desperate desire playing on a strong imagination will create this faith.¹⁶ Quite to the contrary, he 'knows whom he has believed' (2 Tim. 1:12), and is therefore persuaded that the decisions he makes are made in partnership with the Lord of the kingdom. For Paul, the Christian leader is a co-laborer with God (1 Cor. 3:9), especially through his intercession.¹⁷ In Acts, the fullness of the Holy Spirit is essential to all who take responsibility for God's people. Peter, Stephen, Barnabas, and Paul are so described. Luke wants his readers to understand that submission to the Spirit's control is important in the life of a leader. When the members of the persecuted church lifted their voices with one accord (Acts 4:24), the answer to their prayer resulted in a 'filling' of the Holy Spirit and increased courage. They were enabled to stand fearlessly against their enemies with their testimony undeterred.

Faith exercised in prayer is one sure path to knowing God's will.¹⁸ This is superbly illustrated by Paul during his voyage to Rome. The Apostle demonstrates the caliber of leadership so necessary in men of God.¹⁹ His recognized trustworthiness in Sidon (Acts 27:3) and his voice of authority as he addresses captain and centurion alike (Acts 27:10) are choice examples. Concern for others, despite his circumstances, motivates the Apostle to admonish the ship's authorities concerning future damage to life and property which their decision to attempt to reach Phoenix would entail (Acts 27:9f). Still later Paul encourages friend and foe alike, after the storm at sea had all but destroyed any hope of salvation (Acts 27:22). Intimate communion with the Lord of creation made exercise of decisive leadership natural.

6. A further credential of proven value in the leader's qualifications is a cooperative spirit. 'Spiritual leadership serves others.'²⁰ Innate self-sufficiency that looks with disdain on harmonious interdependence will spell failure in work of God.²¹ In a clock many wheels and gears may run counter to each other, turning at widely differing speeds, yet each contributes to the accurate measure of time. Just so the leader's role exists in part to ensure effective unity and cooperation.²² Prayer is the Lord's ordained means to create cooperative interrelationships. The leader, like a winning coach, must be the catalyst that unites members of the body.

But prayer remains the primary means by which Christian *koinonia* can be achieved.

7. A final qualification that Christian leader must not fail to acquire is experience in spiritual warfare. How can the 'strong man' be bound, his hell-bound captives freed (cf. 2 Tim. 2:26; Is. 61:1; Eph. 4:8-10) and his house spoiled, unless the leader is filled with a divine boldness (cf. Mt. 12:28, 29; Mk. 3:27; Lk. 11:21,22)? Just as in physical warfare an officer's courage and strategy can spell the difference between victory and defeat, so it is in the spiritual realm. Paul assures us that, crucial to any victorious engagement with the devil and his infernal forces, we must put on the whole armor of God. This God-given panoply, comprised of the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of the faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, can only be worn and effectively employed through prayer (Eph. 6:13-18). Such is the divine plan and provision to 'stand against the devil's schemes' (Eph. 6:11).²³

A heart for God, a vision that will not merely be content to continue traditional actions and practices, a person proven in trying human circumstances and divine testing, one who is teachable, full of faith and the Spirit, who strives for excellence while battling Satan through confidence in God: such are the characteristics of the person who can confidently be elevated to a position of leadership. When these qualities are found in those God chooses, it is astounding to contemplate 'the almost limitless possibilities of one life' (cf. Rom. 14:7).²⁴ Such a person will follow in the path of men like William Carey who adopted this motto: 'Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God.'²⁵ Well within a biblical orientation came the answer to a question put to a Chinese Christian: 'Where do you get your leaders?' 'From the prayer meeting.'²⁶

II. Prayer, The God-Ordained Means of Raising Up Leaders

Selecting and Raising Up Gifted People

Men and women after God's own heart, who will direct his affairs on earth in keeping with his laws, rise to the top in answer to prayer. Did God not select and groom Moses to lead Israel out of slavery in answer to the cries of the Lord's tormented people? Was not Samuel's birth and life a response to the pleading of Hannah's inaudibly whispered prayer (1 Sam. 1:13)?²⁷ 'Elijah, without his praying would have neither record nor place in the divine legation: his life insipid, cowardly, its energy, defiance and fire gone.'²⁸ Nehemiah's role in the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem and the revival of revealed religion among the returned Jewish exiles was a response to his own prayer: 'I mourned and fasted and prayed' (Neh. 1:4). We may assume that 'the people worked with all their heart' because Nehemiah prayed as he worked and worked as he prayed (Neh. 4:4-6).²⁹

Space will not permit additional consideration of well-known biblical leaders whose lives were immersed in prayer or men of Augustine's caliber who owe to faith-filled prayer their conversion and evangelical prominence.³⁰ Nevertheless, we need to be reminded constantly that prayer is God's means of raising up leaders who otherwise would never have come to prominence.

No illustration, however, is so constraining as our Lord's own example. After an entire night spent in prayer, he chose from numerous followers disciples 'whom he also designated apostles' (Lk. 6:13). This latter designation significantly emphasizes the authority and responsibility they would exercise in the future. 'You did not choose me', he told them, 'but I chose you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name' (Jn. 15:16). The fruit represents people who would at a later date be incorporated into the Messianic Community. In that precise context, Jesus emphasized the importance of asking the Father in his name as the key to producing and maintaining fruit.

As Jesus looked forward to the expanding boundaries of the world mission, he foresaw the paucity of effective leaders. The solution he mandated was, and continues to be, prayer. 'Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Lk. 10:2; Mt. 9:37f.). Jesus made prayer the key to gathering the unharvested fruit. The biblical requirement remains: effective leaders arise in answer to believing prayer.

Art Wiens, for long years a missionary in central Italy, and Jim Elliott, well known Auca Indian martyr, formed a group of Wheaton College students to pray for missions. There were one thousand five hundred students on campus in 1947. Why not ask God to send one thousand of them to the mission field? Confidently they prayed. Art besought God for every student, following the student directory. Today Wiens' tattered prayer diary, kept since college days, included 535 missionaries scattered throughout the world, from that period, whom Art prays for regularly by name! Only the dedicated prayer effort can explain the numbers of effective Wheaton College workers around the world today from that important period.³¹ When the basic problem in a church ministry or project is

anemic leadership, the Bible offers a foolproof solution. Beseech the sovereign Lord to grace his church with ‘gifts’ (Eph. 4:8, 11), men and women who will serve according to the pattern of the Master.

III. Prayer in the Preparation of Leaders

Potential leaders often lie undetected and unchallenged in the community for lack of training and experience. Who but Jesus would have perceived the possibilities for pioneering in world missions in those Galilean fishermen?

From powerless peasants to world-class leaders required training in how to pray. Yet as the director of a large missionary society writes, ‘leadership development is essential to church development. Growing churches must have leaders of sufficient quality and quantity or growth will slow [down] and sometimes stop’.³² The training consisted in verbal teaching and practical examples. Jesus’ teaching on prayer admonished the disciples to distance themselves from the hypocrites who pray in synagogues and on street corners only to be seen (Mt. 6:5). Power in prayer can only be expected where a leader is humble enough to keep his deep, intimate relationship with God a secret.

Moreover, true prayer excludes thoughtless babbling. Meaningless repetition neither impresses God nor commends itself to the accompanying hearers (Mt. 6:7). Petitions that gain God’s ear put the sanctity of God’s name in first place and envision the priority of the King’s rule. That his will be performed must be seen as all that really matters (Mt. 6:9,10). Furthermore, Jesus instructed his disciples to request the true bread that does not perish but ‘endures to eternal life’ for their daily spiritual sustenance (Jn. 6:27).³³ No leader can serve effectively as long as he harbors resentments or carries a burden of guilt. In prayer he may examine the soil of his soul for any ‘bitter root’ so that by its extraction trouble may be avoided (Heb. 12:15). He is freed to accept God’s forgiveness in the same measure in which he can ascertain that he has been reconciled to every offending or offended brother (cf. Mt. 5:24; 18:21-35).³⁴ Finally, the struggle against Satan and temptation can be won only by believing prayer. Therefore Jesus taught his disciples to become conscious of their spiritual frailty. They are instructed to ‘watch and pray so that [they] will not fall into temptation’ (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38). Wrestling against the evil one, Jesus did not segregate his disciples into a fortress; rather they were sent into the world with the singularly effective weapon of prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer, while given indiscriminately to all his followers, has a special application to leaders. According to Luke, Jesus gave this exemplary prayer to his immediate followers, who became conscious of their need for schooling in the spiritual art of praying while observing their Master pray (Lk. 11:1).

By the parable of the Friend at Midnight (Lk. 11:5-10), Jesus instructed his disciples that without asking they would have nothing to offer famished ‘guests’. Whoever neglects intercession will have a bare spiritual cupboard unless he or she has the boldness to ask confidently. No matter how inconvenient the hour of need, God is ready to open the door and give lavishly to a son who knocks (Lk. 11:10).³⁵

In addition to teaching the disciples how to pray, Jesus interceded for them (Jn. 17). John has preserved an example of his concern for his pupils. Some themes in this high priestly prayer may be mentioned. 1. The sovereignty and ownership prerogatives of the Father are shared by the Son (vv. 2, 10), a truth which assures that all who pray according to his will are partners in Jesus Christ's own intercession. 2. The glory of the Father and the Son has been given to the disciples (v. 22). Jesus' petition for his disciples is an extension of the prayer for his own glorification.³⁶ 3. Both the name and the teaching of the Father have been ministered to the disciples by the Son (vv. 6, 8, 14, 25, 26). 4. The successful communication of the knowledge of God and of the Son (vv. 3, 25, 26), the former being the source of his life and work (vv. 7, 8) has been completed. This list serves to remind all people of prayer that where a firm foundation of truth is missing, prayer is futile. Through the Lord's prayer of consecration (vv. 18, 20, 21) they are transformed from followers (disciples) to leaders (apostles). This does not mean that they will now act independently in their mission in the world, for the ascended Lord will be interceding for them (vv. 11-12. Heb. 7: 25).³⁷ The petitions Christ makes for them and for future leaders are: exclusively for his own (vv. 9, 20), that the Father may keep them (v. 11), that they may be one (v. 21), that they may have the full measure of Christ's joy (v. 13), that they may be sanctified in the truth (vv. 17, 19), that their commissioning to serve the world may not differ from Christ's mission (v. 18), that the life of Jesus may be lived out in them (v. 23) so that they may be united as are the members of the Trinity and in the future arrive at the place where Christ is (v. 24) to see the glory that belongs to the Son.

Throughout this prayer the priorities of God's glory, and a personal knowledge of God (including his name and word), become crystal clear. The evidence of the answer to Jesus' prayer in the disciples' lives should be holiness and harmonious unity. The apostles who would direct the expansion of the Palestinian church of Jesus Christ into a hostile Jewish, then pagan Gentile world, would have to be convinced of the over-riding importance of each element in this prayer. The same needs continue today.

How soon would those young leaders, weaned from their Master's visible company, learn to pray 'not so as to wrest from God advantages' for themselves 'nor to escape from tribulations and difficulties, but to call down upon themselves and others those things which will glorify the name of Jesus Christ'?³⁸ Luke's inspired history in Acts describes the commitments of the disciples: 'They all joined together constantly in prayer' (1:14). During a prayer meeting the Holy Spirit visited them like a flood (Acts 2:1-2). Everyone could observe the immediate effect. God through the Spirit allied himself with insignificant, fearful, and inconsistent men and women. Divine power flowed into them. Their bold words 'cut to the heart' (Acts 2:37) and the new covenant people of God were formed, committing themselves in turn to master the doctrine and to pray (2:42). Prayer, as Jesus had assured them, was the means whereby incompetent cowards (cf. Lk. 22:57ff.) would be changed into bold, wise leaders (Acts 4:13).

Instinctively, those first Christians needed no one to tell them (in the words of S. D. Gordon) that 'the great people of the earth are the people who pray . . . not . . . those who talk about prayer, not those who say they believe in prayer, nor yet those who explain about prayer; but I mean those who take time and pray'.³⁹ The Spirit became their tutor 'who helps us in our weakness' and overcomes our ignorance, guiding us in our questioning and interceding along with us with inarticulate groaning (Rm. 8:26,27). They counted on the truth Jesus taught them. Consequently, when the apostles realized that additional administrative duties would curtail their time for prayer and teaching, they

delegated this encumbrance to the Seven so that they might devote themselves to prayer (mentioned first!) and to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Prayer is God's ordained means of accomplishing his will in the world.⁴⁰ The Son is the heavenly enthroned Partner. God the Spirit is your indwelling prayer Partner.⁴¹ Evidently those people who prayed for Peter's release from Herod's murderous designs did not expect him to be restored in such a spectacular way (Acts 12:3-17), but Peter himself faced the prospect of decapitation with tranquil equanimity. Why should he not calmly sleep? He had experienced the incapability of Hades' gates to hold the dead when he knelt and prayed by the lifeless body of Dorcas. Though dead, she heard the inspired command to arise, and obeyed (Acts 9:40f.). The restoration to life is neither easier nor harder for God than to effect a release from prison and an escape from a king's assassination plot.

In Antioch the cell group of pastoral leadership supported their teaching ministry with prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2). The Holy Spirit took such an occasion to consecrate Barnabas and Saul for the first Gentile evangelistic mission in history (v. 3). We may speculate that there was a continuing prayer cooperation of Simeon (Niger), Lucius, and Manaen with former colleagues, the newly appointed missionaries.

Thus it occurred too that William Carey's sister, almost totally paralyzed for fifty-two years in London, petitioned God for her brother's ministry in India, hour after hour, day after day.⁴² God, by means of prayer, offers us the privilege of investing our time and effort in his most important purposes for the world.⁴³ Although John Mark, the junior member of the team (Gr. *hypēretēs*, Acts 13:5) abandoned the mission, he surely observed the power displayed through Paul's prayers (cf. Acts 13:9-12). Some years later, this same John Mark would quote the Lord's words on prayer in his gospel: 'Have faith in God . . . I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea" . . . it shall be done for him . . . Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours' (Mk 11:23,24). From the lives of Jesus and Paul, Mark grasped the possibility of praying with authority and confidence.⁴⁴

Paul urged the church in Thessalonica to 'pray continually' (5:17). To the Christians in Asia, he pleaded, 'And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests' (Eph. 6:18). He reveals his own practice, 'I constantly remember you in my prayers' (2 Tim. 1:13; 1 Th. 1:2). The phrases ring out: 'night and day praying exceedingly . . . praying at all seasons . . . watch and pray always'.

He exhorted the readers in Gentile communities to pray, all who would find in Paul their example, just as the great Apostle valued the prayers of his distant children in the faith: 'He [God] has delivered us . . . and he will deliver us . . . as you help us by your prayers' (2 Cor. 1:8-11)

There is small wonder that young men who lived in intimate fellowship with Paul and Jesus should also learn the urgency of intercession. But how deficient do today's public prayers usually sound to those who look up to their pastors for encouragement along the road to genuine prayer?⁴⁵

It is easy to imagine what Paul would think of any contemporary overemphasis on intellectual progress, often gained in theological seminaries at the expense of spiritual growth. Coleridge was right, 'An hours of solitude passed in sincere and earnest prayer, or the conflict with and conquest over a single passion or subtle bosom sin will teach us more of thought, and will more effectually awaken the faculty and form the habit of reflection than a

year's study in the schools without them'.⁴⁶ How will the candidates for leadership in the church improve or even maintain the spiritual climate if they are not convinced of the importance of prayer? When Luther was asked on one occasion what his plans were for the following day, he answered, 'Work, work, from early until late. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer'.⁴⁷ Who will challenge the customary apathy when pastor and professor keep silent? Will pastoral candidates learn of the essential role prayer has played in revival and missions? Will they begin their pastoral duties ignorant of Jeremiah Lanphier's weekly prayer group meeting in New York? It spread and intensified until 'all meeting places in the city were packed. Within months, 10,000 were gathering on the streets, and in two years, two million converts joined churches in America'.⁴⁸ Are seminarians learning of the Moravians' one hundred year prayer meeting and its impact on world evangelism?

It is not surprising that so few schools, whose stated purpose is to prepare people for the ministry of the gospel, offer a single course on prayer? Only recently Pastor Davi Gomes, an outstanding Brazilian evangelist and nationally known leader, has begun to offer a course on prayer in two seminaries of Rio de Janeiro. The exception tests the rule. As long as teaching how to preach has ascendancy over schooling in prayer, there is little hope for revival or any significant increase in the exercise of divine power. 'Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom'.⁴⁹ Jesus left no clarion call for his followers to study, but he did declare 'that men ought always to pray and not to faint' (Lk. 18:1 KJV). And when there is a 'praying pulpit it will beget praying pews'.⁵⁰ Very few today who are set apart for the ministry of the gospel have learned what Luther was convinced of: that, 'As it is the business of the tailors to make clothes and cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray'.⁵¹ But effectual fervent prayer requires intimacy with God: and intimacy requires development. This intimacy becomes not a duty but a privilege, the fellowship of the saint who returns to communion as naturally 'as a bird to its nest'.⁵²

From where will the inexperienced trainee gain confidence to draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16),⁵³ if he has never known anyone who could say as did Adoniram Judson, 'I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for anything but it came at some time – no matter how distant a day, somehow, in some shape, probably the last I would have devised, it came.'⁵⁴ How will a new generation of pastors and church leaders learn its unique dependence on prayer unless it has been taught?

The prevailing materialism, the captivity to narrow denominationalism and clericalism, the tepid spiritual temperature of the church, the constant threat of theological error and iniquity abounding are enemies too powerful to restrain without prevailing prayer. Yet it is questionable if the graduates of theological schools around the globe are any better prepared to face their roaring foe than was Peter in Gethsemane and during Jesus' trial. Fledgling leaders learn what is expected of them from the practices on numbers and buildings, while the prayer meeting is mortally sick, does not augur well for the future. If the average praying resembles a child who creeps up to ring the doorbell, then runs, not waiting for the occupant to appear or respond, it will be but a foolish and wearisome rite.

God's chosen leaders are to be people of prayer, whatever the human selection process may be. 'Men of prayer are needed especially in the position of church influence, honor and power.' Only then will the world cease scoffing at her impotence.⁵⁵ Men and women of prayer encourage others to pray; they are not so proud of their prayer power that they belittle the prayers of colleagues, church members, or Christians in general. Rather, they

welcome them like the Spirit who intercedes in and through him who prays. Samuel Zwemer wrote, '[True] prayer is God the Holy Spirit talking to God the Father in the name of God the Son, and the believer's heart is the prayer room'.⁵⁶

IV. Conclusion

Prayer is the most important element of the Christian life, the nerve center of our fellowship with Jesus, in conjunction with the serious reading of Scripture. P.T. Forsyth was right: 'All prayer is an answer to prayer.' But if prayer has declined to the level of mere 'lip-labor', disaster can be averted only if God in grace visits his church with a divinely instilled longing for reality. Henry Martyn movingly expressed such an ambition: 'After all, whatever God may appoint, prayer is the great thing. Oh, that I may be a man of prayer.'⁵⁷ As liberal theology has penetrated the church through its leadership training schools, so also positive change can follow if godly men and women who consciously live in the presence of God will make effectual prayer a priority. Only those who value prayer as Daniel did (Dan 6:10) ought to become models for all who prepare for ministry (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). Only those who have learned the biblical importance of prayer should exercise the prerogatives of leadership over God's people. Bonhoeffer said, 'The first condition which makes it possible for an individual to pray for the group is the intercession of all the others for him and his prayer'.⁵⁸

Paul, aware of his need, pleaded, 'Pray also for me' (Eph. 6:19). Jesus, the Supreme Leader, urged his intimate friends, 'Stay here and keep watch with me' (Mt. 26:38). Leaders, we conclude, will best fulfill their ministry if they pray much and succeed in mobilizing those over whom they exercise authority to sustain them in prayer (cf. Exod. 17:10-12). An effective prayer life is not optional for any Christian; its omission is unthinkable for any leader.