

Kneel Down or Get Going

The Tension Between Prayer and Action

By Dana Olson



Sally felt hurt by Molly's comment, even though she knew her friend meant nothing by it. Sally had to miss their monthly time slot volunteering at the women's shelter because of a schedule conflict. She had committed to lead the women's morning of prayer at her church that weekend.

"Oh sure, you just sit there and pray. I'll be the one getting my hands dirty!" Molly had said. "We do-ers have to make up for you pray-ers."

Sally isn't the only one to face such stinging remarks. It seems that the tension between "do-ers" and "pray-ers" has been around a long time—at least since the time of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42).

How can we reconcile the two?

A Pray-er and a Builder

The news couldn't have been much worse. "The city is a

shambles. You'd be shocked. All protections are destroyed, and access is wide open. The enemy is having a field day."

Nehemiah was disheartened to hear about his beloved city, Jerusalem. What to do? Intervention seemed an utter impossibility. There was nothing to do but fast and pray.

And what a prayer he prayed! It was an expansive prayer about God's astounding greatness and faithfulness to all His promises, confession of the sins of the people, the only hope being God's promises of renewal, and then, finally, a request for success "against all odds." (See Nehemiah 1:4-11.)

After fasting and prayer, what was next for Nehemiah? His to-do list might have looked something like this:

- Get a leave of absence from work.
- Ask the boss to pay for everything.
- Travel back home.
- Survey the job that needs to be done and make a plan.
- Inspire the "home folks" to overcome their fear and get working.
- Split everyone into teams to get the job done.
- Fend off doubters, skeptics, opponents, and detractors.
- Finish in record time.
- Celebrate.

And the miracle happened: every item on that list got done—in record time. A city was saved from its enemies.

Nehemiah's story has moved generations of Christians to pray and work, work and pray. So imagine Nehemiah, during his days of fasting and prayer—crying out to God on behalf of his people—yet being accused with, "All you do is pray. Get up off your face and do something!"

Or imagine Nehemiah checking the "wall work," dealing with problems, and reassigning workers for greatest effect, then being confronted with, "Work, work, work. You should pray

more. Why don't you stop what you're doing and call upon the Lord?"

The Myth of a Tension Between Praying and Doing

Both Scripture and church history are filled with examples of Nehemiah-like, godly people who both pray and “work, for the night is coming.”¹ On occasion, those who love to pray are accused of being so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. But is that valid?

Here's the truth: prayer and Kingdom-minded effort are both absolutely necessary and needed. Often the same people do both.

There are exceptions. I think of a grand “do-er”—or activist—named Dale, who was legendary in the movement of churches I grew up in. Dale and his wife and children served the Lord in Asia, devoted to the Great Commission. Later, Dale became a leader in the headquarters of our mission. Far too young (to our way of reckoning), a medical diagnosis of ALS (commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease) brought a premature end to Dale's days as a do-er. But Dale's Kingdom-minded determination kicked in, and he became legendary for his prayer life. He interceded across America and around the world from the wheelchair to which he was confined.

Jim is another example. From the time I met him in seminary, I felt deeply for his predicament of living with a permanent, debilitating disability. Yet Jim, like Dale, welcomed prayer requests and devoted himself to what he could do—intercessory prayer. Hundreds of missionaries, pastors, and faithful workers benefited from Jim's prayer life.

Disability is not the only exception. Some of God's people sense a special urgency to pray. They love to pray. They consider intercession their unique calling. Often some special circumstance has led them into a life of earnest, effectual

prayer. They may have a specific focus or passion—for lost loved ones, for missions (even a specific part of the world or people group), for those suffering from illness, or for revival and spiritual awakening. At times these intercessors feel misunderstood and underutilized by their church family.

Activists, Too, Meet with God

Few people have achieved such evident Kingdom success as Bill and Vonette Bright did. As founders of Campus Crusade for Christ (now CRU), their passion for a Los Angeles campus student ministry in the 1950s led to one of the largest Christian ministries throughout the world today. What was the key to this growth? Both Bill and Vonette attributed it to a mighty prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. Before her death in 2015, Vonette wrote:

Bill and I recruited everyone we could think of to serve as prayer partners. Dividing each day into 96 segments of 15 minutes each, we worked to fill every slot and have around-the-clock prayer. We wanted to know that someone, somewhere was uniting in prayer for this ministry.

We knew that Scripture said to pray without ceasing. We were depending on the Holy Spirit to guide every step we took and work in students' lives, in response to prayer. Campus Crusade was born in prayer, and prayer will always be our lifeline.²

George Mueller founded orphanages and ran them “by prayer.” Hudson Taylor had a “spiritual secret”—prayer—and founded the China Inland Mission. The Korean Church rises early in the morning for daily prayer and has sent thousands of workers around the world to plant churches.

Prayer and Kingdom work go together, which is no surprise

since the Bible is full of praying activists, including several apostles. Peter, John, and Paul come to mind. And Jesus Christ Himself was the ultimate praying activist. Jesus prayed through the night before choosing the twelve (Luke 6:12–13). And Jesus would heal multitudes and then withdraw to pray (Luke 5:15–16).

How do we manage this occasional tension between the do-ers and the pray-ers? By reminding ourselves of several biblical realities:

1. It is by God's Spirit. God is the One who moves His people to pray by His Spirit. And He is the One who moves the hands and feet of gifted people to get His work accomplished. Sometimes the two are the same group: those who pray, also do something. (Nehemiah is a great example.)

But not always. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." Sometimes God uses prayer-watering saints to intercede for a situation where they will never, and could never, be hands and feet. I have prayed for many years for gospel outreach to the Fulani people of Africa. Once I even had the privilege to visit the work there and pray for God's hand to move. But I do not live there and likely never will. I don't speak the Fulfulde language, but I do speak the language of prayer.

2. God, use me! When we pray for God to work in a specific situation, we certainly want to be open to His leading us to be an answer to our prayers. Neither Dale nor Jim were able, literally, to lend a hand due to severe limitations, so they became focused intercessors. Yet most of us have the capability to enter into the work in one way or another.

Many are the missionaries and Christian workers who, growing in their hunger and thirst for God and desire to see God's Kingdom spread, began to pray in earnest "your kingdom come,

your will be done" (Matt. 6:10), only to sense God's call on their lives to go and make disciples of the nations.

3. Proceed with caution. A caution is due here, however. In our desire to "be the answer to our own prayers," we can try to "fix things" and fool ourselves into disobedience. Remember Abram and Sarai? In Genesis 15:4, the Lord told Abram that his very own son would be his heir. But instead of waiting patiently for the hand of God, Sarai pressed her servant Hagar upon Abram, and he foolishly submitted. Ishmael was the result, but Isaac was still to come.

In our haste to "get God's will done for Him," we can commit grave errors of judgment. This combination of prayer and action requires discernment, patience, and a commitment to wait upon the Lord.

4. Pray before, during, and after. God's Kingdom work will not be accomplished apart from prayer. The hands-on activists who want their lives to count will do well to remember that God's work done in God's way will always have a prayer component.

The well-worn illustration of the lumberjack who never bothered to stop and sharpen his axe is well worn for a reason—it hits home. Hard Kingdom work can result in little fruit when it's approached in a prayerless way.

Why not stop to pray first, then take a breather to pray during your work, and finally conclude the work with prayer as well? Why not recruit "those who love to pray" to cover your efforts before you even begin? This kind of dynamic teamwork between gospel activists and gospel intercessors yields tremendous fruit for the harvest.

Years ago I heard a quote that is attributed to the most aptly named missionary in all history, Jonathan Goforth (1859–1936). He said, concerning a time of harvest and revival in Asia, "When God came, he produced more fruit in half a day than we could have achieved in six months of hard labor."

Together—for His Kingdom

So, activists, remember that whatever we do for God is God's work and must be done in God's way, by prayer. Respect, appreciate, and love the pray-ers in your life. Put them to effective use in the accomplishments of the Kingdom.

Intercessors, be thankful for the hardworking activists who love to stake out new territories and reach the lost. Commit to supporting them "by prayer" so that their labor is not in vain.

In other words, Sally and Molly, you need each other! Appreciate what each of you brings to the Kingdom banquet table. Celebrate your opportunity. Kneel down and get going!

¹In the words of the Annie L. Coghill hymn, based on John 9:4.

²From the article "Born in Prayer" by Vonette Bright, pray2020.org.

DANA OLSON is senior pastor of Faith Baptist Fellowship, Sioux Falls, SD, and a member of America's National Prayer Committee. He founded Prayer First of Converge Worldwide, and is chairman emeritus of the Denominational Prayer Leaders Network.

This article is taken from Prayer Connect, a quarterly magazine produced by the National Day of Prayer Task Force. To subscribe, click here.