

Possibilities and Perils

What Happens When a Church Develops Authentic Prayer?

By Daniel Henderson



Every parent knows the incredible anticipation and joy of the birth of a child. Filled with hope, we can think nothing but the best as we anticipate the journey of parenting.

However, the demands and dilemmas involved in raising a child can quickly overwhelm even the most optimistic of parents. Children are an amazing blessing from God, but the pathway of parenthood can also be fraught with many dangers, toils, and snares.

Similarly, most Christians have a positive perspective about prayer—and most speak enthusiastically about “talking with God.” We eagerly embrace prayer as a tool for both personal enrichment and coping with difficulties. Many church leaders aspire to see prayer become more evident within their congregations.

However, when we move beyond romantic notions about prayer to real commitment, unexpected opposition always follows. Concerted efforts to make prayer an authentic and all-encompassing reality in the life of the church can evoke perplexing responses.

After 30-plus years of pastoral leadership in prayer (and working with hundreds of pastors across the nation to develop greater levels of prayer) I have come to some new clarity about realistic expectations.

The Possibilities

First, let's look at the exciting possibilities of making an enduring commitment to a dynamic culture of prayer in the local church. From the promises of God's Word, church history, and my own journey over the decades, I have a passion to help believers understand what they can expect the Lord to do as they resolutely seek Him together in the context of life and ministry.

1.Expect Spirit-provided direction. Many ministries seem to lack clear direction. The account of the early Church in the Book of Acts, and its members' commitment to obediently wait on the Lord, inspires us. The early believers sought to receive direction from the Holy Spirit for all His blessings in, among, and through them. Today God expects us to seek the leadership and direction of the Spirit for His work (Gal. 5:25; Rev. 2:7). And He gladly provides it.

2.Expect authentic unity. The Spirit is the source and preserver of unity among God's people (Eph. 4:3–6). As we seek the Lord in one accord, receiving grace and wisdom from the Spirit, we are united at the deepest level. We experience and express our oneness in Christ while surrendering other loyalties and agendas to His will (1 Cor. 3:3, 16, 12:13).

3.Expect individual transformation. Prayer is primarily designed to transform our lives and empower us as agents of transformation in the world. Paul described it this way: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

4.Expect personal encouragement and comfort. Our Lord is the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3). The early Church faced many trials but continued to come to the Lord in prayer to receive divine enabling and encouragement in many situations (Acts 4:23–31; 16:25–34). We can do the same.

5.Expect Spirit-empowered outreach. The Holy Spirit is a witness-bearing Spirit (Acts 1:8). The story of Acts is the account of the Spirit of God filling His people as they sought the Lord—and then empowering them with a burden and divine capability to share the gospel locally, regionally, and beyond. In the same way, our lost and troubled world desperately needs His Spirit-empowered gospel lived out through us.

6.Expect growing trust. Nothing allows us to know the hearts of other believers like praying together. Twice in my pastoral ministry, I have been called to large churches following the trust-destroying event of a moral failure by my predecessor. I learned that when God’s people seek Him together, they get to know one another at a deep level. The love of the Spirit restores trust and health, even in broken situations (Rom. 15:30; 1 Cor. 13:6–7).

7.Expect the grace of humility. It has been said that the key to humility is a high view of God. Worship-based prayer cultivates a deep reverence and love for the Lord, according to His Word. This diminishes pride and invites divine grace and wisdom. God blesses humble people and grants them favor in their relationships (James 3:13–18, 4:16; 1 Peter 5:5).

8.Expect “glorious” church services. The New Testament reminds us that our goal in worship services is that participants (saved and unsaved) are compelled to declare, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor. 14:25). His “glory” (His honor and His manifest presence) is our aim (Eph. 3: 21). United hearts, seeking His blessing, invite this kind of work.

9.Expect a spirit of thanksgiving. Paul noted that praying together accelerates believers’ recognition of His work because they are actively participating in it. This multiplies the expressions of thanksgiving to Him (2 Cor. 1:11, 4:15). Nothing compares to the joy of a thankful church.

10.Expect joyful generosity. When the Spirit grips the hearts of people and invites them into His purposes, He also empowers a new level of giving. People drink deeply of the grace that empowers supernatural generosity by giving themselves first to the Lord. He naturally unleashes grace in their finances (2 Cor. 8:5–8).

11.Expect spontaneous ministry mobilization. Like generosity, Spirit-empowered service flows from hearts that are calling on the Lord. When we seek Him, we are motivated to serve Him in the supernatural enabling of His divinely granted gifts.

12.Expect God-ordained growth. Christ wants to build His Church with a growth that comes from God (Matt. 16:18; Col. 2:19). When we declare our dependence on Him as the source of growth, He delights in advancing His work through us by His power.

13.Expect the potential of revival. Revival is a sovereign bestowal of the supernatural power of Christ upon His people. We do not manipulate it by our prayers, but when we pray, we are in a posture to catch the “wind” of revival when it blows. Even our extraordinary praying is often an indicator of the Lord’s prompting and His desire to prepare us for a special endowment of His power.

14. Expect eternal reward. When we stand before the Lord, He will not ask us about the “size” of our ministry but the “substance” (1 Cor. 3:11–15). Ministry accomplished merely in the energy of human effort will be burned like wood, hay, and straw. Christ-reliant, Spirit-empowered, prayer-energized ministry will endure for His glory—and for our reward, like gold, silver, and precious stones.

Be Mindful of the Perils

But perils are also inevitable. When a church makes strides toward creating a culture of prayer, opposition will come from a variety of sources. The reality of prayer perils should not deter you from moving forward. Instead, awareness of them will help you navigate rough waters when momentum stalls.

1. Expect satanic counterattack. When we make the commitment to accelerate our praying, we pick a fight with the devil at a whole new level. Our spiritual enemy is not particularly threatened by a busy church, a big church, an educated church, a high-tech church, a talent-rich church, or even a conservative, evangelical church. He is threatened by a praying church. When a congregation declares their dependence on the power of the Spirit and the Word, through prayer, Satan amasses all varieties of counterattack.

Yet, we are called to be “praying menaces” to the devil. We have powerful spiritual weapons in prayer to wage a winning battle (2 Cor. 6:7, 10:4; Eph. 6:18). We must persist and prevail.

2. Expect superficial resistance. Many people are very content with a nominal request-based approach to prayer. When they hear that prayer can be something more, but that it will require more time and effort, superficial excuses abound. “I already know how to pray” is a common rebuttal.

Additionally, seeking the Lord through intimate worship with fellow believers can feel threatening to some who just want to get together to pray about “things,” usually pertaining to superficial concerns in the lives of other people. Expect pushback.

3. Expect traditional suspicion. Traditions die hard, especially when they have provided a safe and predictable path and a sense of belonging. For decades, churchgoers have been in a rut of attending “prayer meetings” that feature Bible study, discussion, and extended periods of talking about prayer requests—but minimal prayer. To seek to change that tradition through a Scripture-fed, Spirit-led, worship-based approach upsets the established apple cart. Expect misunderstanding and questioning.

4. Expect methodological dissonance. Prayer is a bold declaration that the Holy Spirit is still “the how-to” of faith and ministry. Sadly, we live in a method- and program-dependent church culture. We love to emulate the strategies of other successful megachurches. Some leaders find security in this predictable and “proven” path of ministry agendas. The call to extraordinary prayer will often be met with subtle disagreement by those who find it more compelling to serve the Lord than to seek the Lord.

5. Expect leadership transition. Many volunteer and staff leaders in a church are content to “support” the prayer efforts as long as there are no specific expectations for their personal involvement. During my decades as a senior pastor, staff members would often ask, “Do I have to come to the prayer gatherings?” My answer was standard and clear: “I don’t want to make you come to prayer, but if you don’t want to then we need to have a conversation.”

If the priority of prayer is clear in the Bible, and if it is the obvious direction of the church, then those called by God should have a desire to journey forward in obedience to the

Lord. If this is not in their heart, they eventually transition to succeed in another role or ministry with different expectations. Difficult as that is, unity prevails and blessing follows.

6.Expect slow advancement. I often remind myself and others that a prayer culture is more a “crock pot” than a “microwave.” Experts on cultural change all agree that it only happens through constant, relentless pressure over a long period of time. By grace and the supply of the Spirit, we need to resolve that we will pursue the Lord and His blessing through prayer until the day we die. This is our calling. It is not easy, but it is definitely worth it.

7.Expect personal discouragement. I define discouragement as a “temporary loss of perspective.” In the midst of focusing on the “trees” of weekly prayer ministry, it is easy to lose sight of the “forest” of transformed lives and powerful gospel advancement.

Our Greatest Need

In spite of the perils, be encouraged. Yes, the world, the flesh, and the devil oppose all attempts to embrace extraordinary prayer. John Piper says, “Until you know that life is war you cannot know what prayer is for.”

We must continue to fight the winning fight in the power of the Spirit, through passionate, persevering prayer. He is worthy. We are needy. The single greatest need of the world today is Jesus Christ living through a revived church.

May God give us conviction, perseverance, and great hope as we expect and experience His reward for a faithful, praying people.

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