

*Prayer occupies a primary place in the advance of all the Lord's work and especially in the quest for revival.*

Charles Spurgeon had total confidence in the validity and value of the prayer meeting. Attributing to it the increase of his congregation from a mere handful to in excess of six thousand persons, he stated: "The prayer meeting is an institution which ought to be very precious to us, and to be cherished very much by us as a Church, for to it we owe everything. When our comparatively little chapel was all but empty, was it not a well-known fact that the prayer meeting was always full? And when the Church increased, and the place was scarce large enough, it was the prayer meeting that did it all."

In evangelical churches it has been common to hold meetings for the children of God to engage in united prayer. However, as with all our institutions, we are right to test whether they have scriptural basis. This is especially necessary in an age when the prayer meeting has been jettisoned from the weekly programme of so many churches and when it has been criticised as having no warrant in Scripture.

There are many references in the Old Testament to a figurehead leading a congregation or nation in prayer. Examples include Samuel (1 Samuel 7:5), Solomon (1 Kings 8:22), Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:3–13), and Ezra (Ezra 9:5). Likewise our Lord instructed His disciples in the necessity and nature of true prayer (Matthew 6:9–15).

Nowhere does the value of the collective prayer meeting more clearly emerge than in the ministry of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. Here the prayer life of the New Testament church provides a pattern from which the modern church should learn. The book of Acts reveals that prayer meetings were convened for various purposes.

### **For Encouragement (Acts 1:12–26)**

With their Lord's ascension to heaven the disciples felt conscious of the removal of the strong protective wall of His presence. In the deep desolation of their spirits they resorted to prayer. Nothing emboldened them, lifted their spirits, or strengthened them to bear the innumerable trials they were now exposed to like drawing near to the Lord in united supplication. Every church would do well to learn the value of prayer meetings during its darkest hours. To join with fellow saints of God—who have experienced trials like ours, who pour out sighs before the throne of grace similar to ours, and who help us with the presentation of our own requests—is a most beneficial use of the prayer meeting. This first Christian prayer meeting teaches us that prayer meetings bring comfort to discouraged people.

### **For Enablement (Acts 2)**

The second chapter of the book of Acts bears eloquent testimony to the fact that God's power may be received in the prayer meeting. Pentecost, the first Christian revival, followed ten days of intense prayer, prayer characterised by whole-hearted unity. The believers "were all with one accord in one place," offering their petitions to heaven when they were suddenly clothed with the power which Jesus had promised them (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). Regular fishermen became extraordinary heralds of the mysteries of salvation and heaven—credible truths that had not been revealed to either philosophers or kings.

Prayer occupies a primary place in the advance of all the Lord's work and especially in the quest for revival. Jonathan Edwards, commenting on Ezekiel 36:37, emphasised that when God has something tremendous to accomplish for His church, His will is that it should be preceded by the earnest prayers of His people: "I will yet for this

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be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." Zechariah 12:10 reinforces the message that God begins to work in His church by pouring out "the Spirit of grace and supplications" in a remarkable manner.

This principle is further demonstrated by subsequent Christian history. Before the Second Great Awakening (1858), Jeremiah Lamphier called a prayer meeting in

downtown New York. Within six months ten thousand businessmen were praying for revival, and within two years approximately two million people were added to the churches.

The same pattern is found in the 1859 revival in Ulster. James McQuilkin and three others met in a schoolhouse every Friday evening for

hundred thousand were added to the churches in Ulster.

Without doubt the great need of the church today is the power of the Holy Spirit. If we wish to receive it, the most likely place to find it is the prayer meeting. It is in that place where the saints agree “as touching any thing that they shall ask” (Matthew 18:19) that the peculiar blessings of heaven are to be found.

### For Emancipation (Acts 4 & 12)

Two incidents of collective prayer recorded in Acts display the prayer meeting as an excellent resource of the persecuted church. In the first, the Christian community raised its voice in supplication after hearing the report of the persecution of Peter and John at the hands of the Jewish authorities. It was a colossal prayer that focused entirely on God. As a consequence of this prayer session, the place where they had assembled was shaken, they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, they spoke the word of God with boldness, and many souls were converted to Christ (Acts 4:31–32).

On the second occasion Peter was imprisoned, and “prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Acts 12:5). Those supplications resulted in a miraculous deliverance for the apostle. The lesson is plain: The people of God have a warrant to assemble together and plead for themselves and others. Times of persecution compel the church to unite in prayer—and great blessings result.

### For Evangelism (Acts 13:1–3; 16:12–15)

Prayer meetings have proved pivotal in missionary success over the centuries. Andrew Fuller’s prayer meeting was instrumental in propelling William Carey to India. That eighteenth-century meeting finds its roots in the practice of the early church. Acts 13:1–3 details how, as a result of a prayer meeting, the Holy Spirit directed that Barnabas and Saul should be appointed as missionaries and sent on what would become the apostle Paul’s first missionary journey.

The first recorded Christian service held on the continent of Europe was a prayer meeting. Acts 16:12–15 describes the riverside prayer meeting Paul attended in Philippi. It was at this meeting that Lydia’s heart was opened to receive the truth. Just as the prayer meeting gave the gospel its first foothold in Europe, so it has sustained many a missionary enterprise across the globe in succeeding centuries.

The unquestionable blessings of the prayer meeting should make us determined never to dismiss or disown it. Rather, as John Newton encourages, let us be quick to join with our fellow believers in taking advantage of its benefits:

*Numbers before have tried,  
And found the promise true;  
Nor has one been denied,  
Then why should I or you?  
Let us by faith their footsteps trace,  
And hasten to the throne of grace. ■*

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prayer and Bible study. They kept themselves warm with armfuls of peat gathered en route. While peat warmed their bodies, the Holy Spirit kindled the fire in their hearts. By the end of 1858 the participants at the prayer meeting had grown to fifty. Intercession was made without distraction for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Their prayers were wonderfully answered in 1859 when an estimated one