

Reformation
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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* is needed in our generation.

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Our Great Need

No aspect of the church's life and ministry more indicates the state of her health than prayer. And nothing so displays the great need for revival in our generation like our prayerlessness.

Our Lord taught His disciples that they "should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). And our Lord used only two parables concerning prayer. Both of these, found in Luke 11:5-8 and Luke 18:1-8, stress the same basic truth—persistence in struggle, or what has been called importunity in prayer.

Surely no area of our Christian life causes us such honest heart-rending concern. And surely most pastors must confess that this is the weakest part of their private lives as well as the corporate lives of the churches they serve.

Why are we prayerless? Why will we do almost anything except pray? This issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* is published to answer these and related questions.

As we all freely confess, prayer has a vital role in our lives. We cannot grow in His grace without praying. The church will not reach maturity without praying. Revival blessings will not fall upon us without praying. And reformation in truth can never accomplish what it should without prayer. Great reformers and great revival preachers were men and women of prayer. Why are we such pygmies in this area?

One central reason is confusion. The nature of true prayer is not understood in our time. We need a theology of prayer and an understanding of God that causes us to pray aright. We have understood prayer as a kind of Aladdin's Lamp that we rub periodically in order to get what we think we need.

The great theologian Karl Barth referred to prayer as our "incurable God-sickness," and so it is. It is God reaching out to man. It is God calling upon man to respond in obedience.

It leads to the realization of our true humanity through the experience of unmerited favor being poured out upon us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is an act of the human will, not a mere resting in stillness, mystically expecting our personalities to be absorbed somehow into God's. Prayer is asking, asking in accord with God's revealed truth in Scripture, and asking in the spirit of "not My will, but Thine be done." This is why importunity is so important.

The earlier Liberalism of our century almost entirely ignored this, and much of modern Christianity has never recovered it. Here the great Reformer Martin Luther can help us. He unashamedly believed and practiced the truth that great gifts from God are always given in response to prayer. The prayer Luther had in view was that which was persistent in asking for good gifts from the Father. Luther freely acknowledged that God gave unsought-for gifts, but he insisted that we should ask and that frequently we "have not because we ask not."

Theologian Donald G. Bloesch in his very helpful book, *The Struggle of Prayer*, observes:

Richard Sibbes [the Puritan] occasionally cited Luther in his writings, and Forsyth [the British Congregationalist, Peter Taylor Forysth] clearly reveals his dependence on both the mainline Reformers as well as on the whole Puritan tradition. Whereas Calvin was more likely to stress submission to the will of God without denying the dimension of importunity, these men emphasized the need to strive with God in prayer; Luther and Sibbes could even speak of prayer as "conquering God" insofar as it sought to bind God to His own promises. The sometimes extravagant claims that Luther and Sibbes made concerning the power of prayer need to be held in tension with Calvin's perception that God remains sovereign even in the life of prayer.¹

Martin Luther wrote that we can face the future always with hope and confidence because prayer is "our power and victory in every trial."² He means, quite simply, that we can not deal with the present or face the future unless we pray. And we must persist in prayer at all times, under all circumstances. This prayer must be from the heart. Rote prayer, or saying prayers, may have some place in the Christian's life, and even some place in the corporate life of the church, but it will never touch this crucial issue of persistent, honest asking. As Richard Sibbes notes, this true prayer must be with "faith, fervency, constancy and feeling."³

Isn't this what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Roman Christians in the first century: "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me" (Rom. 15:30).

This kind of text prompted Sibbes to observe that "Prayer is a kind of wrestling and contending with God, a striving with him." And Luther again, "Nor is prayer ever heard more abundantly than in such agony and groanings of a struggling faith."⁴

Can there seriously be any doubt that we need to rethink our understanding of prayer, and we need to ask afresh, "Lord, teach us to pray?"

Donald G. Bloesch, quoted earlier, identifies our problem and points out the direction in which we should move. Writes Bloesch:

There can be no doubt that authentic biblical, evangelical prayer is now in eclipse. Despite the resurgence of evangelicalism in this country in particular, what has often resulted is a hybrid religion in which the Christian faith is combined with purely cultural values. Too often a vague religiosity has supplanted biblical piety, and this means that secularism is still triumphant, though it appears in a new guise. The opening to the East has abetted the trend toward

experientialism and mysticism, and consequently prayer itself has come to be conceived in a new way. No longer petition to a personal God and intercession on behalf of the world, prayer is now an experience of spirituality, entering into the depth dimension of existence.

The disciplines of devotion have receded into the background as people seek instant salvation through prescribed and easily learned techniques. The often painful and laborious struggle to attain spiritual maturity in Christ that characterized the great saints of the past (both Catholic and Protestant) is singularly absent from the current fascination with spirituality.⁵

This issue, I pray, will assist in addressing the problem itself and in offering several solutions that might lead us again to really pray as our Lord instructs us to.

John H. Armstrong

End Notes

- 1 Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer*, p.viii.
 - 2 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, Introduction.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
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