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ENHANCING CORPORATE PRAYER AT FIRST BAPTIST  
CHURCH IN OWENSBORO, KENTUCKY

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A Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

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by  
Wesley Scott Dunn  
May 2022

**APPROVAL SHEET**

ENHANCING CORPORATE PRAYER AT FIRST BAPTIST  
CHURCH IN OWENSBORO, KENTUCKY

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To my bride, Julie; and to our children, Elliot, Lillie, Jesse, and Silas.

You have extended grace and displayed sacrifice as I pursued this endeavor.

May the Lord bless you and keep you!

Also, to the saints of First Baptist Church of Owensboro, Kentucky.

Your love and care for me—and my family—has been evident for over two decades.

Thank you for your continued support and encouragement to pursue this work!

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## PREFACE

This project was completed only as a result of God's goodness to me through numerous relationships He has placed in my life. I am grateful for each of these influences and cherish how God has used them to bring me to this place in life, ministry, and education. First, God has shown His immeasurable grace and mercy to me through salvation in His Son Jesus Christ. Although my salvation came approximately three decades ago, the sweetness of abiding in Christ grows at each stage of life, and this journey of doctoral work is no different.

Second, I am thoroughly grateful for the partnership of my bride, Julie. Her walk with the Lord and desire to disciple other women is an encouragement. Even more, her desire to disciple our children brings joy to my soul. Elliot, Lillie, Jesse, and Silas are blessed to call her their mother, and I am exponentially blessed to call her my wife. Her tireless labor and care of our home and children during the process of this project are as much a contribution to its completion as any work that I put forth.

Third, I am thankful the Lord graciously granted me parents who shared the good news of Jesus Christ with me and consistently placed me in the environment of our home church to have that message reinforced week after week. Their parental labors were sacrificial and for my good. They sacrificed many things to solidify my opportunity for education and continually encouraged me to pursue the next phase. Their words and actions of support instilled confidence in me to push forward at each new stage before me.

Fourth, the Lord sovereignly placed me at FBC Owensboro approximately two decades ago as a college student. I had no thoughts of serving this local expression of the bride of Christ in the fashion I do today. It is a blessed joy to call this church my faith family because they truly are my family. Over the years they have cared for me, my wife,

and our children beyond what I could ever imagine. It is truly an honor and privilege to lead in the area of discipleship for a church that has been so formative in my own life as a disciple. FBC has supported me throughout my educational endeavors and continued to do so as I pursued this project.

Last, I cannot imagine life and ministry without the influence of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. My wife and I reflect often about how foundational our time on campus was during my MDiv studies. As matters of leading in the home and church arise, I frequently lean on the truth of God's Word impressed on my heart by numerous professors from the seminary. In particular, I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Timothy Beougher, for his influence during not only my MDiv studies, but also my doctoral pursuit. He was vital in conversations leading up to my entrance into the program, especially in choosing my area of focus, and he has obviously been an invaluable guide through the journey of this project. I thank God for the seminary and for the opportunity to continue the equipping process for His glory and the good of the church.

Wesley S. Dunn

Owensboro, Kentucky

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus was crystal clear with His commission for the church from its inception (Matt 28:18-20). The church was and is to be found active in disciple-making through evangelism, teaching, training, equipping, and sending followers out to replicate. The early church, profoundly observable in Acts, effectively lived out the mission not through human wisdom or power but by the working of God's Spirit in and through it. The church of Acts most notably demonstrated this dependence on God for kingdom effectiveness through their prayer with one another. First Baptist Church (FBC) desires to carry out Jesus's commission with a similar effectiveness, which will happen only as its corporate prayer follows the pattern of the church in Acts and ultimately serves as a foundational pillar for its ongoing gospel ministry.

#### **Context**

Established in 1835, FBC has been a mainstay of religious life in Owensboro, Kentucky, for nearly two centuries. The church is a multi-generational congregation, exhibiting health in many tangible and material categories, yet experiencing numerical decline over the last two decades. FBC's decline has not been rapid but is instead slow and steady. The church continues to receive many into membership, but the majority of those people come as a result of transfers from other churches and child baptisms. Adult conversions contribute minimally to the numerical growth of the congregation, signifying a wane in focus on carrying out Jesus's mission.

The pastor and leadership of the church realized this drift several years ago and sought to refocus the congregation. In 2017, the church launched a new mission statement:

“Making, Maturing, Multiplying disciples for the glory of God.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is most often expressed and displayed merely as Making | Maturing | Multiplying. The statement is focused and clear, yet the congregation has yet to observe momentum toward living out this mission. A lack of purposeful corporate prayer stands as one of the significant barriers to embodying this mission.

FBC currently practices the spiritual discipline of prayer. Personal prayer happens daily throughout the congregation. Corporate prayer happens through four different environments or arenas. Corporate worship services serve as the first place that prayer happens with other believers. These services include Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and any special services that might occur. The church’s prayer meeting serves as a second arena in which corporate prayer happens. This meeting occurs each Wednesday at noon. Sunday school classes serve as a third environment where FBC has multiple believers praying together. Finally, smaller gatherings are also a place where FBC members join to pray. These assemblies include discipleship groups, Bible studies, women’s prayer groups, the pastor’s prayer partners (specific men praying during the Sunday morning worship service), staff, or committee meetings, etc.

Even though corporate prayer occurs, a number of concerning factors lead to a need for strengthening, expanding, and ultimately enhancing this foundational ministry. The first concern is the nature of corporate prayer. In most gatherings, excluding the main worship service on Sunday morning, requests are taken and shared with the rest of the group as a guide for the time spent in prayer. The nature of the shared requests rarely give attention to spiritual matters, but instead emphasize physical matters in the lives of members or those family and friends with whom they are connected. Physical illness requests most often dominate the prayer list; therefore, the following time of prayer naturally possesses the same tone. It is right to intercede for those who are ill, yet the

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<sup>1</sup> First Baptist Owensboro, “I’m New,” accessed May 1, 2020, [www.fbcowb.org](http://www.fbcowb.org).

Bible also calls believers to communicate praise to God through prayer as well as petition Him regarding spiritual matters in life, for both self and others. The near absence of spiritual matters in prayer results in a lack of fervent prayer for lost family members and those far from God in the community. The absence of spiritual requests also results in a lack of passionate prayer for growth in holiness among the congregation and a lack of zealous prayer for the expansion of God's kingdom through disciple-making, missions, and church planting.

The second concern is the lack of offerings for a churchwide prayer meeting. FBC, as mentioned, does have numerous environments for members to pray together, but the opportunity for all members to meet together for the primary task of praying is missing. The church does have the weekly Wednesday prayer meeting that happens at noon, yet limitations are present even with this designated time. With the scheduled time in the middle of the week on a workday, it proves difficult for many to participate. In fact, the crowd is almost entirely made up of retired senior adults. In addition, the time together includes lunch, announcements, music, prayer, and a Bible lesson from the leader, with prayer making up less than a third of the time on average. These limitations leave FBC without a true churchwide prayer meeting.

A third concerning factor regarding corporate prayer is that FBC gatherings often rely on a single person to voice prayer before the Lord, which is typically the pastor or a fellow staff member. This approach lends these prayers to a singular influence of spirit and purpose rather than a greater unity found through a plurality of persons engaged in the petitions. The active leading of merely one person often results in a passive status for many in attendance.

Fourth, the status of prayer in the main corporate worship services on Sunday mornings is a concerning factor. During these times, corporate prayer takes a supplemental role in the elements of worship rather than being foundational. This reality is not indicative of every FBC service, but it is a normal representation. Worship leader David

Manner describes the situation well: “Prayer has been demoted to the role of worship service starter, stuffer, and stopper. Instead of a profound conversation with the Father as a primary act of worship, it has been plugged in as a transitional appendage.”<sup>2</sup> As this happens corporately, the congregation perceives prayer to have a low level of importance and carries that same tone into their personal and corporate prayer lives outside the worship service.

A fifth concerning factor related to a need for strengthening, expanding, and enhancing corporate prayer is FBC’s ministry self-reliance, which leads to diminished dependence on God for carrying out His mission. FBC stands financially strong year after year. The congregation is also filled with many people who possess skills and talents that translate well in both professional and ministry settings. Although each of these is a blessing, the temptation can prove strong to rely on those people and resources to accomplish the work of ministry. As this temptation turns to action and then to habit, the congregation depends less on God. FBC lacks a submission to God in corporate prayer for Him to do something among them that can be explained only by pointing to His hand at work rather than the tangible assets of the church.

### **Rationale**

The contextual factors described reveal FBC’s need for a prayer culture change. A number of reasons support this project’s move toward enhancing corporate prayer. First, the congregation needs an enhanced knowledge of corporate prayer. Many in the congregation do not currently understand the biblical imperative and example to approach the Lord as a church. If the people do not know God’s directive for their corporate prayer life, then they will fail to practice the discipline with obedience. In addition, some understand the model of the early church in Acts but misdirect their prayer focus as man-

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<sup>2</sup> David W. Manner, “Why Are We Praying Less and Singing More?,” February 12, 2018, <http://knscsb.org/blogs/dmanner/why-are-we-praying-less-and-singing-more/>.

centered instead of God-centered. The emphasis on physical requests of many corporate prayer gatherings at FBC highlight this fact. Each group mentioned must be taught both the need for and nature of biblical corporate prayer. The Bible, and particularly the model of the church in Acts, serves as the primary tool for this work.

Second, FBC needs enhanced opportunity to participate in biblically faithful corporate prayer. The scattered options currently available to pray with other believers at FBC are targeted at particular groups, but not the entire church. Also, the leaders of these various groups would benefit from participation in ongoing corporate prayer gatherings modeled after what is visible in Acts. This project intended to move toward a strategic planning for such a corporate prayer gathering to begin and continue.

Third, FBC needs the enhanced unity that comes from corporate prayer. The church has the opportunity to hear the prayers of other believers in smaller settings like Sunday school, but these groups are limited in developing corporate unity due to their generational identities and numbers. This project intended to provide enhanced opportunity for various ages of the congregation to join their hearts together as they lift their voices before the Lord.

Finally, and possibly most important, FBC needs an enhanced dependence on God to accomplish the purpose of the church. Relying on the strength, wisdom, power, and resources of the congregation will result in a failure to carry out Jesus's mission for the church. In fact, without Jesus, the church can do nothing (John 15:5). Without submission to God in corporate prayer and pleading for His hand to carry out the work in and through them, FBC communicates self-reliance. This project intended to expose FBC's lack of dependence on God and enhance God's instruction for faithful corporate prayer lives that submit to and exhibit faith in Him to accomplish the great task of making, maturing, and multiplying disciples for His glory.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to enhance corporate prayer at First Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky.

## **Goals**

The following four goals reflect the necessary steps to enhance the corporate prayer of FBC. These goals focus on the understanding, affections, and practice of corporate prayer.

1. The first goal was to develop a curriculum that focuses on the biblical description and practice of corporate prayer.
2. The second goal was to increase FBC's knowledge of corporate prayer by implementing the developed curriculum.
3. The third goal was to increase FBC's desire to participate in corporate prayer by implementing the developed curriculum, particularly the segments of practicing the discipline.
4. The fourth goal was to develop a strategic plan for ongoing intentional corporate prayer at FBC.

Definitive research methodology measured when these four goals had been accomplished. The research methodology and instruments used to measure the success of each goal are detailed in the following section.

## **Research Methodology**

The research methodology for this project included a pre-series survey, a post-series survey, and an evaluation rubric.<sup>3</sup> Four goals determined the effectiveness of the project.

The first goal was to develop a curriculum that focused on the biblical description and practice of corporate prayer. The curriculum covered the basic instances of corporate prayer from the early church found in Acts and the practical application of

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<sup>3</sup> All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

those practices in the church today. In addition, the sessions included plans for exercising this corporate spiritual discipline. This goal was measured by a panel composed of the pastor, the minister of music, the chairman of deacons, and two other pastors from like-minded churches in the community. The panel utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, relevancy, and applicability of the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, then the content was revised until it met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The second goal was to increase FBC's knowledge of corporate prayer by implementing the developed curriculum. The curriculum was taught to forty members of FBC. This goal was measured by administering a pre- and post-Biblical Corporate Prayer Survey which measured the change in understanding corporate prayer.<sup>5</sup> These forty members were selected from the leadership of the congregation, particularly positions of influence like deacons, Sunday School leaders, ministry leaders, etc. The project intended for the teaching and modeling of corporate prayer to enhance the discipline in the lives of these forty leaders for them to influence the remaining members. These participants were granted anonymity, utilizing a numerical system to match the surveys. In addition, if any participants were absent for any of the sessions, then the sessions were made available to them through audio/video recordings. This goal was considered successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

The third goal was to increase FBC's desire to participate in corporate prayer by implementing the developed curriculum, particularly the segments of practicing the discipline. This goal was measured by administering the same survey as mentioned in the

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 1.

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 2.

previous goal, measuring not only responses to questions related to cognition of biblical corporate prayer, but also those related to their affections toward the spiritual discipline. Additionally, this goal was measured by interviewing five individuals at random who actively participated in the class sessions, asking them to elaborate further on questions parallel to those conveyed on the pre- and post-survey, which were related to their desires toward corporate prayer. These questions allowed for enhanced opportunity for participants to express reasoning behind their answers and the changes between the two completed surveys. This goal was considered successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores. The interviews were evaluated and themes summarized resulting in additional insights into the factors that led to the changes in desire.

The fourth goal was to develop a strategic plan for ongoing intentional corporate prayer at FBC. This plan was measured by a panel of the pastor, the church's ministerial staff, and the chairman of deacons. This panel utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness and functionality of the plan, as well as the communication processes and action steps for implementation.<sup>6</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, then the plan was revised until it met the standard.

### **Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations**

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

*Corporate prayer.* *Corporate prayer*, also known as congregational<sup>7</sup> or

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 3.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *The Pastor's Book: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide to Pastoral Ministry*, ed. Douglas Sean O'Donnell (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 265.



mutual<sup>8</sup> prayer, refers to the act of praying with others.<sup>9</sup> Donald Whitney emphasizes that *corporate prayer* should be present in the lives of all believers: “Praying with the church is what Christians eagerly do when they are full of God.”<sup>10</sup> This “praying with company”<sup>11</sup> happens in various environments such as worship services, Sunday school classes, Bible studies, prayer meetings, or any other setting where Christians are coming together to pray.

*United prayer.* *United prayer* is corporate prayer that is focused<sup>12</sup> and concerted.<sup>13</sup> David Mathis speaks to Jesus’s reference of power in united prayer in Matthew 18:15-20 by commenting, “There is an added power to our prayers when we unite with fellows in the faith and make our requests to the Father with our hearts joined together.”<sup>14</sup> Whitney helps clarify when he states that it “is more than sitting in the same location with another and praying about the same thing.”<sup>15</sup> The potential for God’s power and authority are pursued in such prayer. R. Kent Hughes highlights this truth and the numerous areas of focus:

There is mighty power when the church comes together for focused, corporate prayer, because when the prayers are not perfunctory but thought through, and when the people are truly engaged and praying in concert, great grace is poured out on world

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<sup>8</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 166.

<sup>9</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 93.

<sup>10</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 164.

<sup>11</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 112.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor’s Book*, 264.

<sup>13</sup> E. M. Bounds, *E. M. Bounds: The Classic Collection on Prayer* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2002), 165.

<sup>14</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 112-13.

<sup>15</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 166.

mission, local evangelism, national leaders, the preaching of the Word, the sanctification of God's people, and the ill and grieving.<sup>16</sup>

Three limitations applied to this project. First, the accuracy of the pre- and post-series surveys were dependent upon the willingness of the respondents to be honest about their knowledge, understanding, and practice of corporate prayer. To mitigate this limitation, the respondents utilized a numerical survey code to assure anonymity. Second, the effectiveness of the teaching was limited by the constancy of attendance. If the participants did not attend all of the sessions, then it would have been difficult to measure how beneficial the teaching had been. To mitigate this limitation, each teaching session was made available for digital access the following week and participants were encouraged to stay on pace with the series through this format in the event of an absence. Third, I did not serve as the senior pastor of FBC, therefore I had to clear the implementation of each aspect of this project through the pastor. To mitigate this limitation, the senior pastor was included on the curriculum and strategic plan panels.

Two delimitations were placed on the project. First, the project limited the sample size of those surveyed. The project intended to produce future implementation of biblical corporate prayer practices through the strategic plan of the fourth goal, and those actions would most definitely impact more than the limited sample size engaged during the project. Second, this project limited those participating and surveyed to individuals involved in leadership at FBC. Leaders in the congregation usually display a higher level of commitment than others. Utilizing this population of the congregation increased the potential for dedication to the project survey and consistency of attendance during the teaching sessions. Also, focusing on leaders during the project enhanced the potential for replication of the intended changes in knowledge, desire, and practice of corporate prayer to others in the congregation as a result of their influence.

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<sup>16</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor's Book*, 264.

## **Conclusion**

Corporate prayer is vital for a congregation to access the power and authority of the Lord. For FBC to carry out Jesus's mission for the church, corporate prayer with a focus on God and His purposes must become an intentional practice. The congregation would not understand the need for such a transition to concerted and focused prayer together without biblical teaching accompanied by the Spirit's illumination. This project intended to instruct the minds, fire the hearts, and compel the actions of FBC toward biblically faithful corporate prayer patterned after the early church found in Acts.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CORPORATE PRAYER

God works mightily in and through churches that pray together. In spite of this biblical truth, corporate prayer is a struggle for many churches, including FBC. Numerous reasons contribute to churches straying from the discipline of gathering to pray. Many church leaders and members find corporate prayer to be boring and unengaging. Short attention spans with little ability to focus and a lack of spiritual maturity contribute to this perception. In addition, the common practice of sitting and listening to one person go on and on in prayer becomes monotonous. Another lingering factor toward the lack of corporate prayer is the perceived improper stewardship of time. Leaders and members alike understand the church has only so much time together in today's busy society, and time spent sitting in a room takes away from opportunities to be on the move in missional activity. This mindset flows from the narrative that movement and busy activity equates to faithful ministry. One other contributing reason is the lack of or bad previous experiences with corporate prayer. Some may have never had a chance to participate in prayer gatherings, while others have and want little to do with joining another. If they have been part of corporate prayer that ends up being an extended repeat of health updates and lacks spiritual genuineness, then there will likely be hesitation to attend moving forward.

When these three factors lead to a decline in numbers at prayer meeting, leaders begin to question whether to continue the gatherings. Instead, they creatively brainstorm more exciting and attractive programming to engage members. Is this faithful? Is this biblical? Is there another way? The Bible reveals that God works mightily in and through

churches that pray together, and churches should steadfastly<sup>1</sup> devote themselves to the discipline. Eckhard Schnabel argues, “For church leaders and for the church as a whole, prayer is not a duty—it is a joyful privilege; it is not a chore that can be taken care of by one-liners between praise songs, but a passionate desire for the presence of God.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter focuses on instances throughout the first half of the book of Acts as a biblical argument and model for corporate prayer. David Peterson emphasizes the warrant for such an examination of prayer: “It is striking that at almost every important turning point in the narrative of God’s redemptive action in Acts we find a mention of prayer.”<sup>3</sup> The early church was committed to uniting together in prayer and God was gracious to grant them His Spirit, add new believers to their number, cultivate spiritual maturity, direct decision-making, and multiply their ministry; ultimately validating prayer as “the method through which God accomplishes his purposes and directs history.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **Acts 1:1-14 and 2:1-4**

Acts 1 and the beginning of Acts 2 detail the inception of the church’s life.<sup>5</sup> While there is much to be observed, one often neglected treasure of this narrative is the evidence that God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together. Understanding God’s mighty working through united prayer to pour out His Spirit on His church is vital for a church’s motivation toward and continued commitment to the corporate discipline.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 154.

<sup>2</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 89.

<sup>3</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 118.

<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:750.

<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 42.

At the opening of the book of Acts, Luke makes a connection to his previous writing in the gospel account and continues to recount a few scenes of Jesus's resurrected encounters with His disciples. In verses 4 and 5, Jesus ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but instead to wait for the "promise of the Father." The following quotation from Jesus reveals that the gift to be granted was the Holy Spirit; in addition, the receipt of the Spirit would happen "not many days from now." These disciples had witnessed much to this point. They not only watched Jesus perform many miracles, but also predict and live out His death and resurrection. As Jesus predicted the gift of the Spirit, they knew the promise was both important and assured. Darrell Bock explains that Jesus's purpose for giving the order came out of His understanding that "effective ministry requires God's direction and enablement . . . and the Spirit gives the enablement."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Craig Keener notes, Jesus also knew "the disciples could not generate the Spirit or spiritual experience; 'waiting' for the 'promise' entailed faithful dependence on God."<sup>7</sup> FBC is not different from the disciples in its need to trust the orders and promises of the Savior, dependently waiting in life and ministry on the Spirit's necessary direction and enablement.

The next scene of the opening chapter is the final pre-ascension encounter between Jesus and the disciples. As they are together, the disciples have a kingdom restoration timing question for Jesus, which He states is not in their interest. He then tells them what is of utmost interest for their future. John Polhill writes, "Jesus promised the disciples two things: power and witness."<sup>8</sup> When they received the promised Spirit, they would receive His power, which would enable them to carry out the role of witness.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 56.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:676.

<sup>8</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: B & H, 1992), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 85.

statements Jesus made just before ascending were not as much of a command as they further predicted and promised the fulfillment of His divine plan. The disciples had been ordered to wait on the promised gift of the Spirit, and now they were given details of the change and purpose the gift would bring to their lives. FBC, like the disciples, possesses no power without the Spirit and fails to be effective witnesses in its own power.

Following these final statements in Luke's account, Jesus then ascends, leaving the disciples "gazing into heaven." Two angels help to regather their attention and prepare them for Jesus's pending return. I. Howard Marshall suggests that, at this point, "the disciples might have been tempted to return to Galilee."<sup>10</sup> Their leader was gone once again, and the safest place for them would have been back home, away from the direct context of opposition in Jerusalem. On the other hand, they had the command and promise of Jesus weighing on their mind. The disciples chose obedience.<sup>11</sup> Verses 12-14 state that they returned to Jerusalem and gathered in the upper room with the other remaining followers of Christ.

At this critical juncture, the disciples made the obedient decision to return to Jerusalem and began to wait. Yet, they knew what their role and mission was as witnesses and the incentive for immediately engaging in Jesus's mission was elevated through their knowledge of His unspecified return, which could come with His calling the servants to account.<sup>12</sup> Would remaining idle in waiting leave them faithful or unfaithful to their assigned role in the kingdom work? Bock helps to think through this question as he writes, "The disciples' direct and real experience of Jesus and his resurrection qualifies them as witnesses, but the Spirit will give them the capability to articulate their experience with

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<sup>10</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 62.

<sup>11</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:85.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 115.

boldness.”<sup>13</sup> What many in the modern-day church interpret as improper stewardship of time due to lack of perceived activity, as mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, these disciples saw as their greatest pursuit and foundation. Bock further comments, “The disciples are not idle as they wait. They pray and are unified.”<sup>14</sup> Verse 14 communicates that all the disciples, along with the additional followers mentioned, were united and devoted in prayer. F. F. Bruce summarizes their context: “The primary characteristic that marked their life together in this period was prayer, as they anticipated together the promised gift of the Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

The context of this passage illumines the focus of their prayers together. The disciples prayed for the gift of the Spirit, the fulfillment of Jesus’s prediction and promise.<sup>16</sup> Keener assists in seeing this: “Jesus had taught about the kingdom (Acts 1:3) and the Spirit (1:4-5) earlier in this context, and these two themes occur again immediately afterward (1:6,8). Now the disciples are praying for precisely these promised blessings.”<sup>17</sup> Polhill further affirms the emphasis of their corporate prayer by saying their prayer was “undoubtedly for the promised Spirit and for the power to witness.”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus ordered the disciples to wait in Jerusalem and promised the gift of the Spirit. Next, he told them the Spirit would bring them power to actually live out their role as witnesses for Him and the kingdom. They obediently returned after His ascension, waited, and prayed in preparation<sup>19</sup> for the fulfillment of the promise. Eckhard Schnabel

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<sup>13</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:750.

<sup>18</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 78.



explains that these disciples “are not focused on themselves or on their task, but on God, whose power sustains their life and assists them in their mission.”<sup>20</sup> They demonstrate and share this right attitude toward dependence on God through prayer.

Marshall straightforwardly proclaims, “It is as the church prays that it receives the Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Chapter 2 begins with their prayer being “answered in a mighty way.”<sup>22</sup> The day of Pentecost came, and the disciples were all united in one place—“presumably in prayer, continuing the thought of 1:14,”<sup>23</sup>—and then the Spirit filled all of them. As Bruce suggests, “The spiritual baptism foretold by John and promised afresh by the Lord was now an accomplished fact.”<sup>24</sup> The church’s birth was foretold and promised as a baptism of the Spirit and now referred to as a filling. Marshall helps to bring clarity to the terms following his listing of numerous instances of the word “fill” throughout Acts: “These references indicate that a person already filled with the Spirit can receive a fresh filling for a specific task, or a continuous filling. . . . The basic act of receiving the Spirit can be described as being baptized or filled, but the verb “baptize” is not used for subsequent experiences.”<sup>25</sup> FBC may already be baptized in the Spirit as a result of their individual initial conversions, but God longs to fill the church with more of His Spirit as His people humble themselves and pray for His Spirit and power for kingdom effectiveness.

Luke’s account of prayer in Luke 3 (Jesus) and here in Acts 1–2 (the church) exposes a pattern of prayer that should garner the attention of and compel both individuals and groups of believers. The parallelism between Jesus’s prayer and receipt of the Spirit

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<sup>20</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 84.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:794.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 74.

coincides with the church's prayer and receipt of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Just before the descent of the Spirit on Jesus in Luke 3:21, Jesus was praying. Just before the descent of the Spirit on the church in Acts 2:4, the church was praying in 1:14 and 2:1. G. W. H. Lampe says that this illustrates Luke's "repeated doctrine that the grand object of prayer is the gift of the Spirit."<sup>27</sup>

The beginning of the book of Acts illustrates that God grants His Spirit to His people as they pray together for the presence of His Spirit and the power to accomplish their role as effective kingdom witnesses. FBC's effectiveness in making, maturing, and multiplying disciples for the glory of God is not dependent on its own power or ability to stay busy with creative activities that attract people, but rather on God's gracious response of granting His Spirit to the church's faithful devotion to united corporate prayer.

#### **Acts 2:42-47**

At the conclusion of Acts 2, Luke summarizes the church's kingdom life,<sup>28</sup> particularly highlighting the key areas of activity in verse 42: apostolic teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread together, and prayer.<sup>29</sup> Prayer played a crucial role in the early church's community life.<sup>30</sup> As the new community of faithful believers devoted themselves with persistence and perseverance to the practices described by Luke,<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:679.

<sup>27</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1951), 44.

<sup>28</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 118.

<sup>29</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 162.

<sup>31</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 149.

including corporate prayer, the Lord was gracious and generous in manifesting His favor through the daily addition of newly saved followers.<sup>32</sup>

Prior to the section of focus beginning in verse 42, Luke's account through the first two chapters is saturated with content related to the Spirit. Chapter 1 showed Christ's followers awaiting the promised gift of the Spirit. Chapter 2 revealed the coming of the Spirit and His initial activity through the gift of tongues, as well as His continued work through Peter's sermon in the addition of three thousand souls as described in verse 41. The Spirit's involvement did not cease at this point, but instead continued even into the new community's rhythm of life. As Peterson argues, "The flow of the narrative suggests that every aspect of their new life was then brought about by the Holy Spirit."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, their corporate prayer life was Spirit empowered. Keener further emphasizes this understanding: "Prayer proved to be not only a prelude to Pentecost (1:14) but a continuing part of the community's life."<sup>34</sup>

Commentators vary in their interpretations on the use of the plural form of "prayers" in verse 42, as well as the article used directly in front of the word. Regardless of the nuances of the numerous proposals, consensus leans toward these prayers being corporate. Bruce concurs as he states, "As for the prayers in which they participated, the primary reference is no doubt to their own appointed seasons for united prayer."<sup>35</sup> The agreement predominantly comes as a result of Luke's context. The direct context situates the prayer practice in the middle of a summary of the early church's activities, which were communal by nature. In addition, as Schnabel suggests, even if the description does not explicitly "clarify whether private or communal prayers are in view . . . 1:24 and 4:23-

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<sup>32</sup> Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 159.

<sup>34</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:1011.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 73.

31 indicate the latter are certainly included.”<sup>36</sup> Corporate prayers were essential activities of these early Christians because they played “a significant factor” in their life and ministry.<sup>37</sup>

Without knowing the content of their corporate prayer, verse 47 communicates the key to understanding the role between the church’s united prayer life and God’s work in granting new believers to their number. Luke connects the church’s communal practices with their effective witness to those around them as he mentions the favor they carry with people. Yet, Luke is clear who is ultimately causing the salvation of new souls every day. The Lord is adding to their numbers.<sup>38</sup> Schnabel helps further understand by stating, “Luke’s formulation carefully preserves the primacy of God in the ‘success’ of the Jerusalem Christians. It is the Lord who increased the number of believers. God is the author of the salvation of the new converts.”<sup>39</sup>

This section of Acts communicates the essential nature of corporate prayer in the life of the early church as it demonstrates their understanding that God is the One ensuring effectiveness in pursuit of Jesus’s mission. The church displays a posture of dependence upon the One in control through their prayer together. Corporate prayer is only one of the stated practices Luke describes in this summary, but it is necessary. Bock elaborates on this point through stating that the church “seeks God’s direction and is dependent upon God because God’s family of people do not work by feeling or intuition but by actively submitting themselves to the Lord’s direction.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 179-80.

<sup>37</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1:172.

<sup>39</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 184-85.

<sup>40</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 151.

FBC can be faithful in all the other areas of activity mentioned in this summary of the early church's community life, but if it neglects the practice of corporate prayer, it will fail to exhibit dependence on the Lord, the One who ultimately can grant new believers on a regular basis. With corporate prayer included, FBC should pursue the practices Luke presented at the end of Acts 2, which Polhill suggests, "present an ideal for the Christian community which it must always strive for, constantly return to, and discover anew if it is to have that unity of spirit and purpose essential for an effective witness."<sup>41</sup>

### **Acts 4:23-27 and 5:17-42**

As Luke's narrative progresses to Acts 4, much has been said about the growth of the church numerically, but in chapters 4 and 5 readers also begin to view the growth of the church in its depth of faith. Once again, prayer rests at the center of God's work in and through them, demonstrating that He matures believers in churches that pray together. The passages of focus exhibit that God matured the early believers in witness and holiness despite persecution following the church's devotion to corporate prayer.

Chapter 3 tells of Peter and John healing a lame beggar, which not only impacted the man, but also all those who saw the results of the work. This work led to Peter's opportunity to testify to the source of healing: Jesus Christ! As he spoke, religious leaders became angry and arrested Peter and John at the beginning of chapter 4. Yet, as the Word goes forth, so does the impact of the gospel message, and verse 4 claims "many of those who had heard the word believed." The leaders put the two men in custody overnight and questioned them the next day. Peter and John held nothing back and boldly proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in their midst, even laying guilt on the religious leaders for their rejection of Jesus. Their boldness and previous association with Jesus was recognized during the questioning process, as was the status of the formerly lame man. In light of this, the leaders "had nothing to say in opposition." They had no wrongs

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<sup>41</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 122.

with which to convict the men, but warned and threatened them to speak or teach in Jesus's name no longer. Punishment was not handed down, but the threats of future persecution were present and real.

Peter and John returned to their fellow believers and reported what had happened. With the threat of persecution bearing down on them as a church, the group's reaction was to respond in prayer. They turned to God.<sup>42</sup> Verse 23 says they "lifted their voices together." Their first action when hearing of the threats and charges not to preach Jesus's name was to go to the Lord in prayer.<sup>43</sup> This response cannot be overstated in seeking to think through and make application for FBC in the current context. When an obstacle arose, the disciples did not cower in fear. They did not immediately seek after strategies that would be more appealing to the world around them. Rather, they banded together in corporate prayer.<sup>44</sup>

Upon arriving at their corporate prayer in chapter 4, it is important to pause and consider the content of their prayer. Notably absent are prayers for the judgment of those threatening them, as well as prayers for the removal of the persecution.<sup>45</sup> Instead, the corporate prayer contained two parts. The first was an acknowledgment of God's sovereign power,<sup>46</sup> both recognizing Him as Creator (v. 24) and, as Craig Keener notes, by "reading persecution in light of earlier biblical prayers and hence putting it in its place in God's plan (vv. 25-28)."<sup>47</sup> The second part of the prayer was a multi-layered petition,

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<sup>42</sup> Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 229.

<sup>43</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 202.

<sup>45</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 202.

<sup>46</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 252.

<sup>47</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2:1164.

asking “God to take note of the threats”<sup>48</sup> and grant them “renewed confidence and power to go on speaking regardless of opposition.”<sup>49</sup> Schnabel further emphasizes the importance of the structure of the church’s prayer:

This communal prayer underscores the focus and emphasis of the prayers of the believers: they integrate Old Testament Scripture in their prayers, they read the Scriptures in the light of the life and death of Jesus, they focus on Jesus’ death, and they pray for courage and boldness to continue the task Jesus had given to the church and her apostles, namely, to be witnesses for Jesus and his resurrection.<sup>50</sup>

FBC often finds itself in a rut, as mentioned previously, praying solely for physical matters such as health, but this prayer serves as a model for keeping the focus of corporate prayers God-centered and biblically saturated.

Following the narrative from chapter 3 to 4, a question arises. Why was there a need for praying for boldness after John and Peter had just displayed such character in the face of threats from the religious leaders? The believers were aware of the current level of persecution and knew that it would only escalate. Peter and John needed to have a renewal of their courage, even though they had stood strong before. Those who had yet to face what those two encountered needed the divine gift<sup>51</sup> of strength and boldness when their time came to respond. The followers of Christ in the early church had been justified by faith and had experienced the indwelling of the Spirit, but were still in the midst of their sanctification, the process of growth in the Christian life. They knew the mission Jesus had given them and were aware of the Spirit’s role in leading them to accomplish His purposes, yet they still needed maturity in obedience to His calling on their lives. Their united prayer for this once again displayed their dependence on Him, even for their maturing.

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<sup>48</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 252.

<sup>49</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2:1164.

<sup>50</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 252.

<sup>51</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 202.

Marshall observes, “The effect of the prayer was remarkable.”<sup>52</sup> God tangibly displayed His divine favor<sup>53</sup> with their prayer by shaking the place in which they were gathered. He also filled them with His Spirit, and they continued to speak God’s message with boldness. Their petitions were fulfilled at once,<sup>54</sup> and the mission Jesus had left them with was moving forward. The pattern that played out in this section of the narrative follows a similar one Luke recounts in other locations of his writing: “Prayer often precedes mission.”<sup>55</sup> The believers needed maturity in boldness to witness; therefore, they prayed, and God answered and did so with urgency! Such a pattern should shed light on FBC’s need for corporate prayer that pleads for God to bring maturity to its members in boldness to testify to others of Jesus’s message of hope and redemption.

The effectiveness of the corporate prayer found in chapter 4 did not cease at God’s initial answer, but instead continued to be answered in chapter 5. In looking at 5:17-42, Keener notes that “the power of God invites more persecution.”<sup>56</sup> Many signs and wonders accompany the church’s proclamation of the gospel message, which led to the high priest welling up with jealousy and having the apostles arrested and placed in a public prison. Yet, God rescued them that very night through the work of an angel, freeing them from their imprisonment and charging them to preach again in the temple. In 4:29, the believers prayed for God to look upon their threats, to take notice of what they were experiencing. Observing their request and God’s work, Schnabel argues, “The angel’s rescue demonstrates that God is answering the prayer of the Jerusalem believers to notice the hostility of the Jewish leadership and to grant them boldness to proclaim the gospel

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<sup>52</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 113.

<sup>53</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 100.

<sup>54</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 150.

<sup>55</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2:1174.

<sup>56</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2:1205.



despite the ban on speaking.”<sup>57</sup> When God’s people unite together in prayer for His purposes to be lived out in and through their lives, He is faithful to answer.

The high priest and his officials come to an awareness of their absence the next morning and seek to retrieve their prisoners in order to question them. The high priest reminds the apostles of his strict charge not to preach in Jesus’s name, which gives the apostles another opportunity to exhibit their maturity in boldness granted by the Spirit. In 5:29, “Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’” The leaders obviously became enraged, wanting to kill the apostles for their continued disobedience to their commands; yet one of their own, Gamaliel, deterred them from doing so, convincing them that if it is from God, then they could not stop the movement anyway. The leaders took the only steps they knew at that point: beating them and charging them to cease speaking of Jesus.

Their reaction to the punishment gives further insight into God’s answering of their prayer in chapter 4. God had not only matured them in their boldness to witness, but he had also matured them in their holiness. Rather than reacting with fear or anger, they were filled with joy!<sup>58</sup> Their joy was not for just a brief moment but was a “continuous sense of gladness.”<sup>59</sup> They rejoiced at the opportunity to be counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. Furthermore, verse 42 shares God’s continued faithfulness in answering their corporate prayer as they lived out the mission daily through the continued ministry of teaching and preaching Jesus in the temple and from house to house. As Bock suggests, “All of this fulfills the prayer of 4:24-31.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 306.

<sup>58</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 131.

<sup>59</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 319.

<sup>60</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 253.

The church in Acts knew that their maturity in witness and holiness did not depend on their ability or power to make things happen. They knew their level of dependence on God would determine whether or not His purposes were accomplished. The church needed the Spirit to grow them, and prayer resided at the heart of that need. FBC needs maturity in these same areas. What will bring growth in witness? What will bring growth in holiness? The answer lies not in cleverness or strategy, but is instead grounded in united prayer before the Lord who is sovereign and freely grants maturity to churches that pray together.

### **Acts 1:15-26 and 6:1-7**

Regardless of the congregation, problems will arise. Regardless of the church, important decisions loom heavily before the leaders and the people. What pathway should God's people pursue for resolution of their problems and revelation about their decisions? The followers of Jesus in Acts clearly exemplify a foundational principle in answering this question: they pray. Not only do they pray, but it is also important to note that they pray together. Prayers of "marvelous unanimity by the whole congregation"<sup>61</sup> can be found in the narrative of Acts, to which God hears and responds. In chapters 1 and 6 are specific situations where problems arise and decisions must be made. Through recounting these circumstances, Luke points his readers to the truth that God directs decision-making in churches that pray together.

In Acts 1:15, Bock suggests Luke introduces his readers to a problem before the apostles: "The structure of the group is not right."<sup>62</sup> Peter is convinced that Judas' apostasy was a fulfillment of Scripture and required replacement in order "to ensure the core apostolic circle consists of twelve members."<sup>63</sup> With the qualifications necessary for

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<sup>61</sup> Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 162.

<sup>62</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 79.

<sup>63</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 82.

the replacement before them, the apostles put forward two men for consideration: Barsabbas and Matthias. At this point, the temptation for politicking was probably high. Some apostles probably had a greater relationship with Barsabbas, while others would have better known and trusted Matthias. The result of such man-centered attempts at persuasion to a certain candidate would have produced just what happens for many in churches today: division. Yet, these assembled followers of Jesus “turn to God when the time has come to decide between the two candidates for the position of the twelfth apostle.”<sup>64</sup>

Peterson describes what is happening in verse 24 when he shares, “Before casting lots, the disciples united in prayer for the Lord to reveal his will.”<sup>65</sup> This simple act of praying communicates a few of their convictions. One conviction was their dependence on God. By assembling to ask God for the right replacement of Judas, they indicated their dependence on Him in this decision-making process to resolve the problem at hand,<sup>66</sup> not relying on their own wisdom.<sup>67</sup> A second conviction demonstrated was their belief in the sovereign hand of God. Peterson notes, “Those who joined in this prayer believed that the Lord had already chosen the successor of Judas.”<sup>68</sup> The choosing of the replacement was His to make, just as the initial choosing of the apostles was His.<sup>69</sup>

In verse 26, the apostles did cast lots, which fell on Matthias, resulting in Him being chosen as the replacement for Judas. This act was an old era practice sanctioned by God, but such decision-making ended with this situation, never to be seen again in the New

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<sup>64</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 101.

<sup>65</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 127.

<sup>66</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:772.

<sup>67</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 101.

<sup>68</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 127.

<sup>69</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 47.

Testament. The Holy Spirit arrived in the next scene, denoting a new kind of relationship between God and His followers. The apostles even carried out the old era practice of casting lots with a “confidence that the Lord knew the hearts of the candidates and had already made His choice.”<sup>70</sup>

The parallel between Jesus’s initial choosing of the Twelve and the Lord’s choosing of the replacement is found in the discipline of prayer. Jesus turned to prayer when a decision lay before Him (Luke 6:12ff), and now the apostles followed His pattern by turning to the Father in prayer at a time of decision.<sup>71</sup> Bock summarizes this section well by stating, “Readers of Acts are to understand the unit not only as an explanation of how Judas was replaced but also as a precedent for how to seek God as a community in decisions, looking to God to show the way.”<sup>72</sup>

Acts 6 recounts a major problem for the infant church. A certain portion of their congregation, the Hellenistic widows, were being neglected, which led fellow members to raise a flag of concern. This concern was taken seriously by the Twelve, who gathered the disciples together and proposed a plan. The apostles communicated the need for them to continue the ministry of prayer and preaching of the Word of God, which should not be impeded for serving tables. The ministry of prayer, in particular, more likely “refers to the prayers in the gatherings of the believers (2:42), both in the temple and in private houses (2:46-47), and presumably prayers with and for sick believers.”<sup>73</sup> The nature of this ministry being corporate highlights the importance of their leadership of the congregation through preaching, but also in its united prayer life, especially regarding decision-making situations, just like the one at hand. Since they could not give up the

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<sup>70</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 94.

<sup>72</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 90.

<sup>73</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 332.

important tasks of preaching and prayer, they proposed that the congregation choose seven men from among them to carry out the necessary duty of serving in the daily distribution. By delegating the tasks to these seven, more ministry would happen in an effective and efficient manner.

With qualification requirements before them, the members of the church chose the men and set them before the apostles. The apostles accept the nominations and proceed to pray for them and lay their hands on them. This narrative is a bit different from what was just observed in chapter 1, as the prayer here seems to follow the choosing. Yet Marshall is quick to notice a parallel between the two when he states the following about chapter 6: “The whole story is reminiscent of that of the choice of Matthias.”<sup>74</sup> The explicit order of prayer and a following decision is not laid out as clearly in chapter 6, but the corporate prayer of God’s people saturates this section. First, the apostles appeal to their need to continue leading the church in united prayer. Second, the apostles “commissioned with prayer and the laying on of hands, which indicates a recognition of God’s call for this task.”<sup>75</sup> These examples demonstrate the church’s dependence on God in the decision-making process of the seven being chosen and commissioned for service.

FBC parallels with the early church found in Acts and sister churches today: problems arise and important decisions have to be made. As the church demonstrated in Acts, FBC has a clear pattern of initial action when situations lie before it: corporate prayer. Believers are instructed through Luke’s writing that relying on personal wisdom alone would lead the church astray. Instead, FBC is called, along with sister churches, to turn in united prayer to the One who longs to hear and direct the church’s decision-making.

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<sup>74</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 135.

<sup>75</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 262.

## Acts 13 and 14

The passages and topics covered to this point demonstrate the power of corporate prayer in the life and ministry of the local church's immediate context. Yet, with Jesus's mission for the church proposed and promised to reach the nations, does corporate prayer have an impact on the local church's ability to take the name of Jesus beyond where they can imagine? Acts 13 and 14 once again find the church devoted to united prayer, and as a result God multiplies its ministry.

Chapter 13 opens with a lens on the church at Antioch and its role in global missions. Marshall rightly emphasizes the magnitude of this passage: "The importance of the present narrative is that it describes the first piece of planned 'overseas mission' carried out by representatives of a particular church, rather than by solitary individuals, and begun by a deliberate church decision, inspired by the Spirit, rather than somewhat more casually as a result of persecution."<sup>76</sup> With this understanding in place, it is crucial to observe how the church at Antioch multiplied.

The first verse lists the leadership of the church, which included Barnabas and Saul (Paul). Verse 2 finds the church "worshiping the Lord and fasting," during which time the Holy Spirit spoke and called Barnabas and Saul to a particular work. The church then fasted and prayed. Following those activities, they laid their hands on the two men and sent them off to carry out the Lord's work for which He had called them. As observed through the rest of chapter 13 and all of chapter 14, the two men are set apart and sent out as missionaries. They went to multiple locations away from home and boldly proclaimed the gospel in the face of much opposition and persecution, which led to the making of many disciples. Barnabas and Paul discipled these new believers in the faith and helped see churches established and elders appointed in every church.

The accomplishment of this amazing process of multiplication had a foundation.

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<sup>76</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 227-28.

Bock describes the foundation: “Everything about the event argues that mission is grounded in God’s command and the response of a church engaged in devotion.”<sup>77</sup> The Lord multiplied the ministry of this church that came to Him in a “gathering for communal prayer.”<sup>78</sup> The fasting and prayer of the third verse was vital as the church commissioned the men for their coming work. Schnabel observes, “They pray surely for wisdom, guidance, courage, and protection for Barnabas and Saul as they embark on a new missionary initiative. They lay hands on them as they pray for Barnabas and Saul, invoking God’s presence, blessing, and empowerment.”<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, also necessary in the process was the often-overlooked corporate prayer in the second verse. The fasting and prayer of the third verse came after the Spirit spoke, yet the corporate prayer of the second verse precedes His speaking. The word *prayer* is not explicitly stated in the second verse, but “the worship of the church in Antioch would have included prayers (v. 3) as well as teaching and the breaking of bread (2:42).”<sup>80</sup> In addition, since the activity of worship is “coupled with fasting, the reference is most likely to prayer.”<sup>81</sup> Marshall concurs with this view and highlights that fasting is “also associated with prayer in 14:23.”<sup>82</sup> Polhill suggests that as the church of Antioch fasted and prayed, it was “seeking the divine leading in a mode of expectant devotion.”<sup>83</sup> Even as Polhill makes that statement, he concludes that the “worship” of the church in the second verse at a minimum included the corporate prayer of the body. “God’s leading

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<sup>77</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 438.

<sup>78</sup> Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 395.

<sup>79</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 555.

<sup>80</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 554.

<sup>81</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 375.

<sup>82</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 229.

<sup>83</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 290.

takes place here in the context of worship and fasting,”<sup>84</sup> which means that the “revelation concerning the mission of Saul and Barnabas came during prayer—indeed, concerted prayer.”<sup>85</sup> Bock further assists in understanding the foundations of God’s new multiplication initiative when he summarizes, “As always, prayer and spiritual forces work together in this text and play a role in guiding the church. These are realities the modern world tends to shun but are foundations of a Christian worldview.”<sup>86</sup>

The church at Antioch devoted itself to the Lord in prayer and fasting, leaving them “specially [sic] sensitive to the Spirit’s communications.”<sup>87</sup> As they committed themselves to Him in this way, He spoke with a vision and calling for multiplication. The church further devoted themselves to dependence on the Lord’s working as they fasted and prayed again in Acts 13:3. Barnabas and Paul set out for the journey and were faithful to the calling throughout chapters 13 and 14. Toward the end of chapter 14, the two men returned to the church at Antioch to report and 14:26 makes an incredible announcement of completion of the work,<sup>88</sup> forming an *inclusio*, or bracket, with 13:2f.<sup>89</sup> In 14:27, Paul and Barnabas gather the entire church together to report all that had happened, which was fitting and right since it was the entire church that had sent them out. Peterson summarizes well the connection between the church’s corporate prayers at the beginning of chapter 13 and the glorious and gracious report they received at the end of chapter 14:

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<sup>84</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 439.

<sup>85</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2:1990.

<sup>86</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 440.

<sup>87</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 245-46.

<sup>88</sup> Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 437.

<sup>89</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 320.



Reporting back was a way of encouraging those believers to see how God in his grace had been answering their prayers. Reviewing their experiences, Paul and Barnabas were able to see the hand of God in everything that had happened. In particular, what God had *done through them* was to bring many to faith, so that churches were planted and patterns of leadership established over a wide area.<sup>90</sup>

The Antioch church's faithful devotion to corporate prayer led to God's faithful action of multiplying their ministry. God began an initiative of church multiplication in a way that had not been seen in the narrative prior to this event, and the foundation was a body of believers committed to united prayer. FBC carries the mission of making, maturing, and multiplying disciples for the glory of God. To see this mighty work accomplished in the days ahead, corporate prayer must reside at the foundation of the church's pursuit of multiplication.

### **Corporate Prayer in Acts**

Schnabel identifies the very reason so many churches are in urgent need of revitalization when he declares,

Many churches in the affluent West live in spiritual poverty, as demonstrated by the decline in prayer. Christians who do not pray regularly and consistently are a contradiction in terms—they deny what they profess, that they have been reconciled with God (with whom they do not want to spend time), that they follow in the steps of Jesus (who prayed), and that they have received the Holy Spirit (who is God's presence, which is experienced in prayer.)<sup>91</sup>

Prayer has been abandoned both by individuals and the church as a whole. Prayer might be present, but is the church devoted to this fundamental spiritual discipline? When the practices of the modern church are held up in comparison to the early churches of Acts, the negative answer becomes clear.

As evidenced in the selected passages, united prayer by God's people preceded many of the mighty works of God throughout Acts. The church prayed together for His Spirit, and He granted their request. The church faithfully prayed together, and He added to their numbers daily. The church unified in prayer for growth in holiness, and He matured

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<sup>90</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 416.

<sup>91</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 262.

their bold witness. The church approached God in prayer together as major decisions arose, and He directed them. The church prayed for Jesus's mission to be carried out and God multiplied the church.

For these things and more to happen in the life of the church today, united prayer must become foundational. God could have sovereignly accomplished His will and purposes for the churches of Acts without their prayers and intercession. He could do the same today. Yet, God has chosen to work through the means of prayer, and more specifically through the corporate prayers of His church.

This chapter laid the biblical foundation for corporate prayer. The narrative from the first half of the book of Acts demonstrates that God works mightily in and through churches that pray together. With this understanding in place, the next chapter will describe the ways in which engaging in corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE DISCIPLE-MAKING NATURE OF CORPORATE PRAYER

At the end of His earthly life, Jesus commissioned the disciples with the task that was to consume and govern their lives: make disciples! This charge was meant to compel them toward leveraging the activities of their lives for carrying out the commission. The prioritized actions they participated in and led others to engage in were for this grand purpose of making disciples. In light of the biblical warrant covered in the previous chapter, the frequency and fervency with which the disciples engaged in united corporate prayer expresses at least two of their beliefs on the discipline. First, they knew the commission would not be accomplished in their own power, but fully depended on God’s Spirit at work in and through them. The previous chapter elaborated on this foundational posture of dependence. Second, the disciples viewed corporate prayer as a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. Although implicit, their prioritization of the activity expressed this belief clearly. The magnitude of the task before them necessitated that they spend their time and energy faithfully and wisely. The disciples’ corporate prayer life and leadership of others to engage in the discipline reveals that they understood corporate prayer to be a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life, ultimately serving their efforts toward fulfilling Jesus’s commission. John Franklin concurs as he expresses, “The apostles knew the best discipleship strategy was to model prayer and create opportunities to pray.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken: How to Lead a Powerful Prayer Meeting* (Nashville: B & H, 2005), 27.

There is a very good explanation about why the disciples viewed their prayer life together as necessary in the discipleship process: Jesus prioritized corporate prayer as He disciplined them. Disciple-making is multi-faceted, meaning prayer is not the only activity of making disciples, but Jesus's actions with followers during His earthly ministry emphasize its necessity as a foundational element. Robert Coleman notes that Jesus would often pray in front of His disciples to model for them what a relationship with the Father looked like.<sup>2</sup> Coleman also observes, "Jesus did not force the lesson on them, but rather he just kept praying until at last the disciples got so hungry that they asked him to teach them what he was doing."<sup>3</sup> As Jesus prayed in front of them, taught them to pray, and prayed with them,<sup>4</sup> the disciples were learning not only how to pray, but also what it meant to abide relationally with God. This practice of abiding sits at the very core of being a follower of Christ. Megan Hill grasps this when she states, "In praying together we disciple one another: we strengthen one another's faith, testify to our experiences of God, shape one another's repentance and desires, stir one another to thanksgiving, and encourage one another in godly habits."<sup>5</sup> In understanding these things, Hill summarizes, "Brothers and sisters, praying together is a school for the whole Christian life."<sup>6</sup>

Corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. More specifically, the practice has a profound impact on the group charged with the task of carrying out Jesus's mission of making disciples: the local church. This chapter highlights various benefits of the spiritual discipline in the personal and corporate lives of believers. Corporate prayer impacts the local church's unity, God-centeredness, missions

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<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Hill, *Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in Our Homes, Communities, and Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 70.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 70.

and evangelism, community with one another, and personal holiness. These are not an exhaustive treatment of the disciple-making effects of corporate prayer on church members but is rather an emphasis of significant desired outcomes. The goal of this chapter is summed up well by David Mathis as he speaks to the profits of praying with company:

Inestimable good happens, no doubt, when the regenerate rally with their fellows; it is past finding out all that God is doing when we pray together. Yet it helps to trace out some of the good, and whet our appetites for some of the graces for which our prayer together is a means. So in helping us to celebrate the place and power of corporate prayer, here are profits of praying with company.<sup>7</sup>

### Unity

The local church can easily become a divided body. Politics, social stances, economic differences, ethnicity, and many other issues can cause members of the same church to isolate into tribes. At another level, silos can also develop for those who prefer or lean toward a particular area of ministry, further entrenching division. The impact of such tension and detachment from one another can severely stunt both personal and corporate growth in the faith. Various approaches to unification may be recommended by internal and external counselors, but the Lord is clear that devotion to corporate prayer develops and enriches unity among church members. Mathis further emphasizes this truth when he states, “Praying together is one of the single most significant things we can do together to cultivate unity in the church.”<sup>8</sup>

The desired biblical unity does not equate uniformity. A culture of uniformity would consist of people from the same socio-economic status, cultural background, ethnicity, age, or stage of life. Possession of these characteristics in a church culture may appear unified but are merely surface level. Biblical unity differs greatly from these

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<sup>7</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 112.

<sup>8</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

external factors and hinges on the internal. Franklin elaborates on this thought as he also looks to Acts:

Five times in the first five chapters of Acts, Scripture records that the disciples were in “one accord.” In each instance the Greek word *homothumadon* is used. The word is a compound from *homos* meaning “same or together,” and *thumos* meaning “passion, anger, fierceness, wrath, indignation, heat, or glow.” Joining these concepts together, the word can be understood as the same burning of heart, or same heart passion.<sup>9</sup>

Biblical unity is ultimately an explicit agreement<sup>10</sup> in belief, purpose, and cooperation. It is a bond of grace<sup>11</sup> under the banner of Jesus Christ.

John 17 provides a unique perspective into the prayer life of Jesus in His final earthly days. This chapter reveals His heart for the current disciples and ones to come in the future. Verses 20-23 take on a particular focus regarding His followers’ relations with one another:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

Regarding this passage, E. M. Bounds remarks, “The subject of their unity pressed upon Him. Note how He called His Father’s attention to it, and see how He pleaded for this unity of His followers. . . . Notice how intently His heart was set on this unity.”<sup>12</sup> The reason for such earnest petitions toward the unity of His church is found in the midst of the prayer. Verse 21 implores that unity is necessary “so that the world may believe that

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<sup>9</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Praying Together for True Revival*, ed. T. M. Moore (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 99.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1998), 380.

<sup>12</sup> E. M. Bounds, *E. M. Bounds: The Classic Collection on Prayer*, ed. Harold Chadwick (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2001), 356.

you have sent me.” Verse 23 explicitly states that perfect unity must be present in believers “so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” The heart of Jesus’s plea to the Father for unity among His followers is grounded in His ultimate mission of making disciples! Bounds argues, “The oneness of God’s people was to be the one credential to the world of the divinity of Christ’s mission on Earth.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus knew that when God’s image bearers lived in unity, they would rightly reflect God’s character and nature of unity in the Trinity. On the other hand, Jesus also knew “division and strife are the devil’s bequest to the Church, a heritage of failure, weakness, shame, and woe.”<sup>14</sup> Unity in the church matters to Jesus.

This visible peculiar beauty of the church’s unity<sup>15</sup> was not the only reason for Jesus’s intent focus of the John 17 prayer. He also knew the power of the church’s prayer life depended on their unity. In Matthew 18:19-20, Jesus stated, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” The context of these verses is a passage on church discipline, but a “prayer principle and prayer promise”<sup>16</sup> is placed in the midst of this passage. Donald Whitney illuminates this truth by expressing,

There is, however, one word in this verse that makes it broad enough to encompass all corporate prayer. Notice that Jesus says in verse 19 that “if two of you agree on earth concerning *anything* that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in

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<sup>13</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 356.

<sup>14</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 356.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, *Praying Together for True Revival*, 100-101.

<sup>16</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 165.

heaven” (italics added). Thus we can take this promise and apply it to any united prayer not just prayer regarding church discipline.<sup>17</sup>

Andrew Murray suggests, “Jesus is powerfully attracted by the love and unity of His disciples.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus longed for unity in His disciples not only for the beautiful manifestation of His glory to a watching world, but also for the power it would bring in their corporate prayer life. The agreement of two or more “carries greater weight.”<sup>19</sup> Whitney further elaborates on this point when he states, “He is giving us an added promise of power that comes when God’s people unite in their requests to Him. Of course, this is a unity of spirit and purpose that goes beyond mere agreement of the terms of the request. United prayer is more than sitting in the same location with another and praying about the same thing.”<sup>20</sup> The “difference between mutual prayer and united prayer”<sup>21</sup> is that “His name must be the center and the bond of the union that makes them one. . . . The presence of Jesus, alive in the fellowship of His loving, praying disciples, gives united prayer its power.”<sup>22</sup>

Observing the heart of Jesus toward unity helps to conclude that true united corporate prayer demands unity of church members, particularly under the banner of His name. Andrew Davis supports this when saying, “Extraordinary prayer meetings are inherently attractive to the godly and repulsive to the nominal members.”<sup>23</sup> Davis is communicating that corporate prayer is truly pursued and participated in faithfully only

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<sup>17</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 166.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer*, 381.

<sup>19</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 166.

<sup>21</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 166.

<sup>22</sup> Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer*, 381.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 101.



by those who are regenerate and unified in their commitment to God’s glory. Furthermore, the effectiveness of corporate prayer through God’s answers demands unity, as seen in Matthew 18. It is also accurate to say simultaneously that true united corporate prayer produces unity among church members. Jonathan Edwards supports this when saying, “Union in religious duties, especially in the duty of prayer, in praying one with and for another, and jointly for their common welfare, above almost all other things, tends to promote mutual affection and endearment.”<sup>24</sup> The great awakening of 1857–1858 gives experiential foundation to producing unity through corporate prayer. The revival began as a result of daily prayer meetings in New York City and was notably participated in by people from various denominational backgrounds. J. Edwin Orr summarizes the nature of the revival:

The Great Awakening of 1857-58 produced the highest degree of real cooperation and unity among the various evangelical Christian denominations until then known in modern times. The general “zeal for souls” blurred denominational lines and diminished the denominational ambitions for aggrandizement. Some previous awakenings had been divisive in effect but this one witnesses the denominational walls “crumble to the earth before the heaven-descended impulse.” The simple word “union” became the dominant description of the hundreds of prayer gatherings.<sup>25</sup>

The joining together of believers for prayer resulted in a profound unity, which resulted in Jesus’s disciple-making mission flourishing nation-wide. Samuel Prime describes the event: “And now the great truth illustrated and established by this great revival of the present time, the fourth great revival, is the cardinal doctrine of Christian union; oneness of the church; a real unity; a oneness of all her members in Christ, the Head.”<sup>26</sup>

True united corporate prayer both demands and produces unity in fellow church members. These truths can be perplexing. In reviewing these realities, there is potential to

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<sup>24</sup> Edwards, *Praying Together for True Revival*, 102.

<sup>25</sup> J. Edwin Orr, *The Event of the Century: The 1857-1858 Awakening*, ed. Richard Owen Roberts (Wheaton, IL: International Awakening Press, 1989), 276.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel I. Prime, *The Power of Prayer: The New York Revival of 1858* (1859; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 69.

consider them as contradictions of one another. The temptation is to think that one must come before the other: Corporate prayer either demands unity or produces unity. The reality is that these are parallel truths. Mathis brings clarity by explaining:

There is a unity that is a given to those who are fellows in Christ and share spiritual life in him. Acts 1:14 says it was “with one accord” that the first Christians “were devoting themselves to prayer.” Already we have the “unity of the Spirit,” and yet we are to be “eager to maintain” it (Eph. 4:3). So praying together is both an effect of the unity we already share in Christ and a cause for deeper and richer unity. It’s not only a sign that unity exists among the brothers but also a catalyst for more.<sup>27</sup>

Mathis’ mention of Ephesians 4 sheds light on the reality that members of a local church are of “one body and one Spirit . . . called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4-5). These members, if truly regenerate, walk in the Lord under the same banner of Jesus Christ. At the same time, Paul uses Ephesians 4:3 to urge every church member to continue pursuing unity.

Maintaining unity in a local church often requires “fighting for” the posture due to the self-serving nature of much activity within the body. God’s directive for fighting well for unity is found in the pursuit of corporate prayer. God uses prayer meetings to weave hearts together into a rich tapestry,<sup>28</sup> unified in both their common standing in Christ and His purpose of making disciples. Corporate prayer ushers in an interdependence that matures over time and creates a corporate bond unique to the body of Christ as well as a development and growth for each participating individual. Murray summarizes this thought well:

It would be unnatural for the children of a family to always meet their father separately, never expressing their desires or the love jointly. Believers are not only members of one family, but of one body. Just as each member of the body depends on the other, the extent to which the Spirit can dwell in the body depends on the union and cooperation of everyone. Christians cannot reach the full blessing God is ready to bestow through His Spirit until they seek and receive it in fellowship with each other.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer*, 380.

## **God-Centeredness**

Combatting selfishness is a consistent struggle in the Christian life. Self-centeredness creeps in regularly as the fleshly nature continues to wage war. The apostle Paul testified, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate” (Rom 7:15). He had new desires in Christ, but selfish fleshly pursuits continued to tempt and tug at him. Many can identify with Paul as grappling with the issue seems to be a daily tension, whether at home, work, or in the church as preferences are sought above all else. Not only do individuals wrestle with selfishness, but congregations also corporately battle self-interest. Paul condemned the Corinthian church in chapter 5 of his first letter for their willful toleration of sexual immorality by one of their own church members. They knew about it and sought out selfish recognition through their boasting. Selfishness led this church to arrogance in their sinful toleration.

In chapter 11 of the same letter, Paul had to condemn the selfish actions of groups in the congregation related to the partiality shown in carrying out the Lord’s Supper. Whether personal or corporate, Paul knew that joy and fulfillment in Christ would be absent in the presence of self-centered living, so he pleaded with the Philippians: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others” (Phil 2:3-4). Discussing budgets, determining new leaders, deciding on building renovations, discerning appropriate ministry programming, and a plethora of other situations can reveal personal and corporate preferences. One of God’s greatest antidotes for such self-centeredness is prayer. Devotion to corporate prayer heightens God-centeredness among church members.

Chuck Lawless emphasizes this point well when he states, “Prayer is a relationship with this God, and praying churches focus on Him and on those He loves. A

church simply can't focus on God through prayer and remain centered on themselves."<sup>30</sup> Lawless underlines the two areas of focus that result from prayer together: God and others. Notably absent from the statement is a focus on self. This change of focus happens because prayer changes a person.<sup>31</sup> As believers pray with one another, their hearts are reoriented vertically toward God and horizontally toward others. As Davis highlights the role of prayer in church revitalization, he elaborates on this vertical focus and exactly how believers grow in God-centeredness:

It makes perfect sense to us that prayer changes the hearts of all who invest themselves passionately in it. Prayer conforms us to God's heart and plans and makes us long for them to be consummated. . . . The more we invest our prayers, the more committed to God's purposes we will become, simply because we have sacrificed our time and brought forth our hearts to be touched.<sup>32</sup>

The action of gathering with others to pray begins to impress the purpose of prayer on the lives of His followers. Lawless explains, "Not to line God's will up with ours, but for us to line up our will with God's."<sup>33</sup> This posture of dependence upon and focus toward God also translates to "more glory for the Giver when He answers,"<sup>34</sup> which ultimately eats away at the glory-grasping self-centeredness that can mark many young and long-tenured church members.

Unfortunately, selfishness dies such a difficult death in the lives of believers that even prayer, a tool God uses to change and mold us, can be hijacked by the Enemy.

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<sup>30</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Charles E. Lawless, *Eating the Elephant: Leading the Established Church to Growth*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Pinnacle, 2003), 89.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Revitalize*, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Davis, *Revitalize*, 99.

<sup>33</sup> Harry L. Reeder III and David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 105.

<sup>34</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 113.

Satan “leads people toward arrogant and selfish praying.”<sup>35</sup> Corporate prayer has the potential and God-ordained intent to focus a congregation toward Him and His ways, but members can easily succumb to the temptation to “pray mostly for what we want to see happen in the church.”<sup>36</sup> Self-focused prayer fails to recognize the relational nature of the discipline. Believers are not the only ones to communicate in the conversation. The dialogue of prayer is meant to have both God and believer speak, and in the context of corporate prayer, this would mean that both God and the church speak. Given the tendency to talk with God in a selfish way, John Onwuchekwa suggests a method his church has implemented in prayer gatherings to hear from God also: “When we gather on Sundays, the preached Word is the steak. This is not that time. Still, the Word is a vital part of what we’re trying to do. So we begin with a five-to-fifteen-minute encouragement from God’s Word and that serves as the basis for prayer that evening.”<sup>37</sup> By beginning prayer gatherings with hearing from God first, the focus can be set on Him and His desires for the remainder of the time. This tone aligns directly with how Jesus modeled for His people to pray in Matthew 6:10 when he instructed, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Mark Clifton summarizes these thoughts well when he exhorts, “It’s what God wants for your church that matters, not what you want. . . . Prayer needs to focus on seeking what God wants for His church.”<sup>38</sup>

As previously established, corporate prayer should not focus on self, but instead turn the gaze of church members toward God and others. Yet once again, even a good tool

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<sup>35</sup> Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors: Growing Healthy Churches That Are Equipped for Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 156.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization: Overcoming Eight Common Barriers to Church Renewal* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 29.

<sup>37</sup> John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 99–100.

<sup>38</sup> Clifton and Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization*, 29.

like praying for others can be hijacked by the Enemy to deter God's people from staying on His agenda. Many prayer gatherings in local churches become an organ recital, praying for "lungs, livers, kidneys, hearts."<sup>39</sup> These meetings become "tedious and unproductive"<sup>40</sup> when the list of health concerns grows so long that it dominates the entirety of the time. It is not as though health concerns are not worth praying for, but in the church-wide prayer meetings, Onwuchekwa counsels that leaders should "populate the prayer list primarily with kingdom, whole body, and major life concerns."<sup>41</sup> The physical health of church members and their extended contacts is important and of concern to God, but not more important than spiritual matters the church should take to God for His action and power to resolve. The church must devote time to praising the Lord and thanking Him for the work He is doing. Additionally, corporate prayer gatherings should be marked by pleading with Him for things such as evangelistic opportunities, more laborers, success of the ministry of the Word, true conversions, and deeper discipleship. Exclusively praying for health concerns, or having them dominate the prayer list, can sidetrack the people of God from focusing on Him and His mission.<sup>42</sup>

Self-centeredness is a battle in the Christian life, personally and corporately. One of God's most prominent attacks against it is prayer gatherings that turn members' affections, attention, and focus toward Him. As the church models this God-centeredness in its corporate prayer life, church members are equipped to live it out in their personal prayer lives and beyond.

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<sup>39</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 100.

<sup>41</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 25.

## Missions and Evangelism

With a pastoral heart, Onwuchekwa shares, “While every church has something to be discontent about, the most common discontentment involves getting church members to live missionally.”<sup>43</sup> From personal experience he further elaborates, “Trying to encourage Christians toward evangelism has been one of the most difficult endeavors in my time as a pastor.”<sup>44</sup> Onwuchekwa is not alone in his perspective but joined by a multitude of church leaders. The proposed solutions for the shared problem are many, but the core of a remedy must include corporate prayer. Devotion to corporate prayer reorients church members’ hearts toward missions and evangelism. Franklin illustrates this point as he pictures different scenarios in the church:

Have you ever tried to lead someone to practice missions and evangelism who does not spend any time in the Word of God or regularly cry out to God with other believers? It’s closely akin to pulling teeth. What do you have to do to motivate that person? Everything you know to do, and even then it rarely works. But let me ask you another question. What do you have to do to involve a believer who is spending regular time devouring, applying, and obeying the Word of God, who is constantly on his knees with other dynamic believers, crying out to God and experiencing God move in response to his prayers? Far from beating him into action, you merely have to point out the opportunity.<sup>45</sup>

Even as the population increases, declining conversions and baptisms describe the current state of the church in North America. The reaction for decades has been to produce more and better methods for reaching the lost, but has seemed to fall short as an answer. Onwuchekwa agrees and offers insight:

When it comes to training Christians for our corporate mission, we often assume people just need more training, more knowledge, more apologetics, more motivation, and a little bit more guilt. There’s no shortage of evangelism programs, books on how to properly evangelize, or Facebook ads that guarantee church growth. Some of these efforts are helpful. However, I don’t think the main obstacle to evangelism is competence, which means the best fix isn’t just more training. To be sure, training is

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<sup>43</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 22.

a part of the solution, but if you've come from a background like mine, then you've sat in churches with some pretty competent people but little evangelistic activity.<sup>46</sup>

There has never been a time in history when the church has had as much ability to disseminate God's Word across the neighborhood, state, country, and globe the way it can be accomplished today through technology and marketing; yet the statistics continue to reveal diminishing action and results for the church. Whitney highlights, "The Bible and testimony of church history say that, despite how outdated it may seem, the effectiveness of the gospel and of the church are inseparably related to the united prayers of God's people."<sup>47</sup>

With Jesus's commission to "go and make disciples" at the forefront of their mind, church leaders carry particular desires for the members of the churches they shepherd. They long for each member to share the gospel with unbelievers; invite unbelievers to the church's gatherings; give toward mission work; and go on mission to their "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Obstacles stand in the way of members obediently living out this universal calling. Even though numerous hurdles could be mentioned, two deserve attention: fear and apathy. Timothy Beougher addresses each of these in his writing on barriers to witnessing. According to Beougher, "Fear seems to be the greatest of all barriers to overcome in witnessing."<sup>48</sup> Fear in evangelism can be the result of feelings of inadequacy in not knowing enough to share with someone else.<sup>49</sup> It can also be the result of thinking "they will do more harm than good."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 172-73.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy K. Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing* (Charlotte, NC: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1993), 9.

<sup>49</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 9.



In addition to ignorance and harm, worry develops for many believers who fear rejection,<sup>51</sup> not wanting relationships to grow tense because of sharing the hard truths of the gospel message. These fears are often the product of placing too much weight on one's own ability to see another saved. Bearing such responsibility for the eternal soul in front of you can bring about crushing anxiety: "carrying weight we were never meant to carry."<sup>52</sup> Such tension in the life of a believer can even cause an evangelistic approach that manufactures false or incomplete gospel presentations to manipulate converts, sharing "the gospel in a way people will accept rather than a way they'll understand."<sup>53</sup> Neither the inactivity nor wrong activity mentioned is desired. Ultimately, the witnessing barrier of fear fails to recognize the sovereignty of God in the process.

On the other hand, a failure to recognize God's granting believers the privilege and responsibility in kingdom work results in the second barrier of focus: apathy. Beougher laments, "The Bible shows that it often takes God longer to get a Christian ready to witness than it does to get a lost person ready to be saved."<sup>54</sup> There are two main reasons for this posture of apathy in the life of a believer: avoiding responsibility and lacking compassion. Although God is sovereign in the process of salvation, He still gifts believers with the opportunity to serve as His ambassadors and servants in bringing new followers into His family. The problem is that many believers can grow lazy and "wrongly believe evangelism somehow becomes inconsequential because God is in control."<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Beougher highlights that "the single greatest reason we fail to witness is that we do not

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<sup>51</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 110.

<sup>53</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 109-10.

<sup>54</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 110.

possess the compassion of Christ.”<sup>56</sup> A lack of compassion leads to a lack of burden or concern for the lost.

A devotion to corporate prayer reorients church members’ hearts toward missions and evangelism. At the root of the remedy for fear and anxiousness is gathering with others to pray for boldness.<sup>57</sup> At the root of the remedy for apathy is gathering with others to pray for concern for the lost. As Beougher instructs, “If we lack a burden for the lost, we should get on our knees and ask God to give it to us!”<sup>58</sup> Onwuchekwa furthers these points and speaks to the right understanding of the relationship of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in evangelism:

The antidote for carrying weight we were never meant to carry is to let someone else carry it for us. Many of our evangelistic efforts are driven solely by pragmatism and strategy, when lasting abiding fruit comes from prayer (see John 15:8, 16). Praying together removes the pressures for “success” and puts it back on God’s shoulders. When we pray, “Our Father in heaven,” we acknowledge God is sovereign and does what he pleases. When we pray for God to save someone, we admit that God alone has the power to do so. When we thank him for salvation, it’s because we know he saved us—we didn’t save ourselves. As we pray to God for salvation, we realize that God’s sovereignty diminishes only our anxiety and apathy, not our activity. Prayer, then, is the pump at the gas station that connects us to the fuel for faithful evangelism.<sup>59</sup>

Praying for such things could obviously be a personal spiritual discipline, but God intends for this practice also to be a corporate spiritual discipline. The model of the early church in Acts (discussed in the previous chapter) sets a tone for praying together for these things. Also, as Mathis explains, “Paul modeled this in asking the churches to pray for his gospel work (Rom 15:30-32; 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 6:18-20; Col 4:3-4; 2 Thess 3:1). He was more than able to pray these things himself, and doubtless he did. But he anticipated there would be greater fruitfulness in the work when others joined him in

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<sup>56</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 112-13.

prayer for it.”<sup>60</sup> Praying together corporately as a church helps to orient the hearts of fellow church members toward evangelism, replacing fear with boldness and apathy with compassion!<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, as the church prays together for opportunities, the Lord will answer the request. Commenting on God’s heart in contrast to that of the believer, Mark Dever assures, “He wants sinners saved. Simply put, we don’t pray for opportunities to share the gospel, so how surprised should we be when they don’t come?”<sup>62</sup>

Carrying out Jesus’s mission to the ends of the earth is equally as important as local evangelism. Training and equipping play a vital role in seeing work toward this large task initiated and sustained, but, as has been established to this point, necessitates the corporate prayers of the church. John Piper emphasizes this point: “God’s goal to be glorified will not succeed without the powerful proclamation of the gospel. And that gospel will not be proclaimed to all the nations without the prevailing, earnest, faith-filled prayers of God’s people. This is the awesome place of prayer in the purpose of God for the world. That purpose won’t happen without prayer.”<sup>63</sup>

The local church’s corporate prayers contribute to reaching the nations in two distinct ways. First, Jesus is clear that the Lord grants missionaries to those requesting them from Him. In Luke 10:2, Jesus tells His appointed missionaries, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” God calls certain people and families to particular places to carry out His mission of making disciples of all nations, and that wonderful work starts with the corporate prayers of the local church. Regardless of whether He calls someone out of the church that is praying, He will answer those prayers and raise up

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<sup>60</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

<sup>61</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 114.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 24.

<sup>63</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 66.

gospel workers to accomplish the mission.

Not only do the corporate prayers of the local church impact the initial sending of missionaries, but also the success of the work that happens when the laborers are on the field. At the same time, corporate prayers for global missionaries and their work impact the ones praying. Onwuchekwa emphasizes this dual effect as he explains, “We should also constantly keep the needs of any supported workers from our body in the forefront, because we want the members of our church to know that they carry the burden of participating in God’s saving work through prayer.”<sup>64</sup> Failure to join together in prayer for the missionaries sent by the church and the work they are doing once again displays a form of apathy. Spending time together pleading before the Lord challenges the lazy notions within the body and underscores the truth that devotion to corporate prayer reorients church members’ hearts toward mission. Bounds argues that corporate prayer is the key for all missionary success:

The key of prayer is in the hands of the home churches. . . . Success will be won by saintly praying in the churches at home. The home church on her knees fasting and praying is the great base of spiritual supplies, the power of war, and the pledge of victory, in this terrible and final conflict. Financial resources are not the real power of war in this fight. Machinery in itself carries no power to break down heathen walls, open effective doors, and win heathen hearts to Christ. Prayer alone can do the deed. . . . The home church has done only a trivial thing when it has furnished the money to establish missions and support its missionaries. Money is important, but money without prayer is powerless in the face of the darkness, wretchedness, and sin in Christless lands. . . . Prayer can make even the poorest of missionary causes succeed, but much money without prayer is powerless on the foreign field.<sup>65</sup>

Whether local or global missions are at hand, the prayers of the church serve as “a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 116.

<sup>65</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 180-81.

<sup>66</sup> Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!*, 45.

## Community

The New Testament is saturated with explicit commands of how believers are to live with and toward one another. J. D. Payne recognizes this call on fellow church members:

The kingdom ethic that kingdom citizens are called to live requires not only a common commitment to God but also a common community or fellowship. Some have referred to this commitment to one another as a covenant. If anything can be said of the Jerusalem Church in the Book of Acts, it is clear that they had a commitment to one another.<sup>67</sup>

Dever further emphasizes this notion by saying, “The duties and responsibilities church members have toward one another summarize the life of the new society that is the church.”<sup>68</sup> Actively pursuing and obeying these directives is part of the maturing process of discipleship, and devotion to corporate prayer contributes to church members’ ability to carry out the one-another commands found in the New Testament. To live out this community life together, believers must know one another. Mathis helps to make the connection between corporate prayer and knowing one another by explaining, “One of the best ways to get to know fellow believers is by praying together. It is in prayer, in the conscious presence of God, that we’re most likely to let the veneer fall. You hear their hearts in prayer like nowhere else.”<sup>69</sup>

The most common of these commands is to love one another. Jesus implored His followers to a life of love in John 13 and 15. Romans 13:8 says, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Galatians 5:13 calls believers to “through love serve one another.” Hill argues, “In prayer together, we love one another.”<sup>70</sup> When praying together, church members begin to know

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<sup>67</sup> J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 46.

<sup>68</sup> Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 41.

<sup>69</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 116.

<sup>70</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 66.

one another and have eyes, ears, and hearts opened to ways they can love fellow members. “Prayer knits our hearts to others in need and increases our concern and eagerness to serve.”<sup>71</sup>

In Romans 12:15, Paul tells believers to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Paul later tells the Galatians in 6:2 to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Corporate prayer is an engine through which these beautiful commands are lived out. Hill understands this and elaborates, “In prayer together, we join in the praises and laments and supplications of our neighbor, bearing his burden to the throne, lending him a hand to cast them on the Lord.”<sup>72</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Paul instructs believers to “encourage one another and build one another up.” The writer of Hebrews in 10:24 challenges believers to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” Hearing faithful followers of Christ united in the Spirit, pray with and for each other encourages, builds, and stirs the body in a supernatural way. Those requesting prayer for a particular evangelistic opportunity are emboldened as they hear brothers and sisters lift the opportunity before the very throne of God. Others struggling with the basic spiritual discipline of reading their Bible regularly are compelled with a fresh hunger for God’s Word as they hear fellow church members intercede on their behalf.

Perhaps the most convincing argument that believers are to join together in corporate prayer is the explicit command of James 5:14-16 to “pray for one another.” Regardless of the various perspectives regarding healing and anointing that surround this passage, the implication seems to be “that there are some answers to prayer we simply would not get without involving others in our praying.”<sup>73</sup> Whitney agrees as he looks to

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<sup>71</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 66.

<sup>73</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

verse 16 and highlights, “Apparently there are some blessings God gives only to those who humble themselves to say that they need others in the church and their prayers. There may be some things you are praying for right now that you will not receive unless the church or a group within the church prays for you.”<sup>74</sup>

The numerous one-another commands of the New Testament call believers to a life of community beyond the natural tendency of self-focus and self-dependence. The prayer life of a believer is no different. God longs to interweave hearts and lives together in a unique way. Whitney warns, “Beware of the spiritual independence of a completely privatized prayer life. The Bible tells us to pray together.”<sup>75</sup> As churches heed his warning and devote themselves to corporate prayer, they contribute to church members’ ability to carry out the one-another commands of the New Testament.

### **Personal Prayer Life**

Many church members’ personal prayer lives are weak and possibly non-existent. Clifton agrees as he expresses, “Most of the people in our churches don’t know how to pray more than just a few minutes. We’ve grown accustomed limiting prayer to thanking God for the food and asking Him to protect us. We can’t fathom praying for forty-five minutes. Most Christians won’t do it.”<sup>76</sup> Whitney shares in the burden as he asks, “Since prayer is talking with God, why don’t people pray more? Why don’t the people of God enjoy prayer more?”<sup>77</sup> Whitney is convinced that the reason is often a result of not feeling like praying due to boredom: “saying the same old things about the

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<sup>74</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 173.

<sup>75</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 174.

<sup>76</sup> Clifton and Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 11.

same old things.”<sup>78</sup> Even though people may understand they need to pray and even know some of how they should pray, they develop a rut that deters them from wanting to pray. Onwuchekwa goes even further in giving a reason: “We can’t assume people know how to pray.”<sup>79</sup> Regardless of the precise reason, the overwhelming truth is that believers need help to grow in their prayer lives. The body of believers to whom they belong bears a responsibility to disciple them in this area of the Christian life. Gathering together to pray serves as a valuable tool in this work. Devotion to corporate prayer disciplines church members, particularly developing and enhancing their personal prayer lives.

When local church members come together to devote themselves to prayer, “it is not merely a school for prayer, but it certainly is a school for prayer.”<sup>80</sup> Learning to pray is not the sole purpose of the meeting, as seen from the previous benefits discussed in this chapter, but training in prayer is most definitely a purpose of the gathering. R. Kent Hughes expresses the reason is that “prayer is more easily caught than taught.”<sup>81</sup> Whitney confirms this in saying, “We can learn to pray by praying with other people who can model true prayer for us.”<sup>82</sup> Hill shares that there are a few ways in which faithful prayer meetings teach believers in the school of prayer. First, “The habit of praying reverently, clearly, and biblically is often learned in the hearing of others.”<sup>83</sup> In addition, “Praying together also fosters a habit of praying regularly, guarding against the sin of

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<sup>78</sup> Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 78.

<sup>80</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 79.

<sup>81</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *The Pastor’s Book: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide to Pastoral Ministry*, ed. Douglas Sean O’Donnell (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2015), 263.

<sup>82</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 93.

<sup>83</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 79.



prayerlessness.”<sup>84</sup> As church members devote themselves to gathering, they fight for the discipline of prayer in their lives even when they may not feel like participating.

Those leading corporate prayer gatherings play a key role in the intentional training of members. R. Kent Hughes, speaking more specifically toward prayer in worship services, emphasizes a leader’s great responsibility: “Our public prayers in our corporate worship services have a massive impact on the prayer lives of God’s people, in that such prayers teach the church how to approach our transcendent but immanent God.”<sup>85</sup> In addition to “what” is said, “how” things are said in prayer carries great influence. Franklin highlights this when he stresses, “Speak out of your own passion. If God has not touched your heart, then don’t be surprised when no one else’s heart is stirred. Passion begets passion. When people catch the sincere fervency you have, then they will more likely be motivated to open their hearts as well.”<sup>86</sup> Just as these responsibilities hold true for leaders, they also apply to seasoned members throughout the congregation. When those with inexperienced or weak prayer lives join in the corporate gathering, the leaders they are influenced by do not always carry a title or platform role in the meeting.

Not only do corporate prayer gatherings allow those weak in prayer to learn from others, but they also allow those in need of growth to practice the discipline. The meeting serves as a sort of training ground for believers. Whitney speaks to this idea when he elaborates, “There are many good resources for learning how to pray, but the best way to learn to pray is to pray. . . . The Holy Spirit teaches praying people how to pray better.”<sup>87</sup> As the less experienced pray, it is both good for their growth in the discipline and edifies their fellow church members. Charles Spurgeon illustrates this

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<sup>84</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 79.

<sup>85</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor’s Book*, 262.

<sup>86</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 99.

<sup>87</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 85.

wonderful dual-blessing as he instructs the local church in carrying out corporate prayer meetings:

Persuade all the brethren to pray aloud. If the younger and less-instructed members shrink from the privilege, tell them they are not to speak to man, but to God. Assure them that it does us all good to hear their groans and ineffectual attempts at utterance. For our own part, a few breakdowns come very sweetly home; and, awakening our sympathies, constrain us to aid the brother by our more earnest wrestlings. It gives a reality and life to the whole matter, to hear those trembling lips utter thanks for new life just received, and to hear that choking voice confessing the sin from which it has just escaped. The cries of the lambs must mingle with the bleating of the sheep, or the flock will lack much of its natural music.<sup>88</sup>

The act of church members gathering to pray plays a vital role in the discipleship process. Onwuchekwa testifies, “Corporate prayer is a way we teach our church how to engage with God.”<sup>89</sup> It is no secret that many Christians struggle with their personal prayer lives, but Mathis encourages believers when he summarizes, “Plain and simple, the best way to learn how to pray is pray with others who have had their prayers shaped by the Scriptures.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. When the church gathers to pray, the aim of the meeting is a vertical trajectory toward God. At the same time, the church must not miss the meeting’s horizontal impact toward one another. Jesus prayed with His disciples as a means of discipling them. His “communal prayer with his men then led to communal prayer in the early church they led.”<sup>91</sup> In turn, the local church would do well to follow in His and their footsteps, corporately seeking

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<sup>88</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Only a Prayer Meeting: Studies on Prayer Meetings and Prayer Meeting Addresses*, rev. ed. (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2010), 18-19.

<sup>89</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 78.

<sup>90</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 115.

<sup>91</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 109.

not just things from God, but ultimately God Himself, the greatest purpose of prayer.<sup>92</sup> Hill summarizes, “I can think of no better—or simpler—discipleship program than for more mature and less mature believers to sit diligently under the preaching of the Word and then to pray together. I can also think of nothing more exciting.”<sup>93</sup>

This chapter has given numerous tangible benefits of corporate prayer in the life of the church. Each one mentioned not only has an impact on personal growth as a disciple, but also corporate growth in the health of the church. With the corporate spiritual discipline of prayer grounded in the biblical warrant of the previous chapter and the practical benefits of this chapter, the next chapter will elaborate on the details of the project implemented at FBC.

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<sup>92</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 116.

<sup>93</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 80.

## CHAPTER 4

### MINISTRY PROJECT DESCRIPTION

After observing the context and discerning the rationale for a prayer culture change throughout the church, I focused this project's purpose on enhancing corporate prayer at FBC in Owensboro, Kentucky. Upon establishing the biblical basis for corporate prayer from the model of the early church in the book of Acts and emphasizing the beneficial disciple-making nature of corporate prayer in the local church, I developed and implemented an equipping class to fulfill the project's purpose. The class sought to increase FBC's knowledge and affections regarding this corporate spiritual discipline. In addition, I created a strategic plan to outline steps toward leading FBC to practice praying biblically together in multiple corporate environments in the life of the church. This chapter describes the process of implementing the project, detailing the elements that contributed to the different phases: class format, curriculum development, assessments, results, and strategic plan development.

#### **Preparation Phase**

##### **Preliminary Work**

In the early stages of the project, particular documents were created to facilitate and evaluate progress. A pre- and post-Biblical Corporate Prayer Survey was developed to be utilized with participants of the equipping class.<sup>1</sup> This survey helped to analyze the effectiveness of the teaching related to the intended impacts on knowledge and affections toward corporate prayer. The survey was written with the responses following the Likert model, allowing for a particular value to be placed on each response for later comparison

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 2.

between the pre- and post-class surveys. The lowest response was “strongly disagree” with a value of 1, and the highest response was “strongly agree” with a value of 6, while also having responses in between these two extremes representing the values of 2 through 5. In addition to the questions, the survey included a waiver to participate, along with instructions.

Beyond the survey work, a curriculum evaluation rubric<sup>2</sup> and strategic plan evaluation rubric<sup>3</sup> were created. Upon writing the curriculum and strategic plan, these rubrics were utilized with separate panels for assessing various elements of each document. The aforementioned documents were presented to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary’s Ethics Committee for review and approval to ensure a low risk factor for the human subjects in the project’s target group.

### **Target Group**

The project limited the sample size of those targeted for participation. Knowing that commitment levels and teaching impact would increase as the sample size of the congregation became more focused, I decided to invite only those in Sunday school leadership or currently serving as a deacon. Additionally, the spouses of those in this group were invited. The reason for focusing on leaders as participants of the equipping class was grounded in the hope of an increased potential for replication of the intended changes in knowledge, affections, and practice of corporate prayer to others in the congregation as a result of their influence. Approximately ninety church leaders and spouses were invited and forty-five registered, although not all attended after registering due to various circumstances. Thirty-eight took the initial survey, including signing the agreement to participate. A total of thirty-two completed the pre- and post-class surveys, allowing for a comparison of the results.

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> See appendix 3.

## **Project Schedule**

The project from start to completion was eighteen weeks in duration, including the preparation phase, implementation phase, and the follow-up phase. The following is an explanation of the weekly schedule, chronologically describing the activities of the three different phases.

The first eight weeks were the preparation period. During weeks 1-6, I wrote the six sessions of the curriculum. During week 7, I submitted the written curriculum to the panel for evaluation. During week 8, I reviewed the results and input from the panel, utilizing their feedback to further revise and finalize the curriculum for teaching the equipping class.

Weeks 9-14 were the implementation period. In week 9, I administered the BCPS to participants prior to teaching and then taught the first session of the curriculum, ensuring both the survey and session were digitally uploaded for access by absent participants. During weeks 10-14, I taught the five remaining sessions of the curriculum, once again ensuring the sessions were digitally uploaded for access by absent participants. In week 14, following all the teaching, I re-administered the BCPS to participants, ensuring the survey was digitally uploaded for access by absent participants.

Weeks 15-18 were the follow-up period. In week 15, I compared the pre- and post-class surveys utilizing a *t*-test for dependent samples. During week 16, I developed a strategic plan for ongoing intentional corporate prayer at FBC. In week 17, the panel evaluated the strategic plan. During the eighteenth and final week, I reviewed the results and input from the panel, utilizing that feedback to further revise and finalize the strategic plan.

## Equipping Class Curriculum

The equipping class curriculum<sup>4</sup> was written during the late summer of 2021, in preparation for class sessions in the following fall semester. The majority of the content for the class material was derived from the work completed for chapters 2 and 3, while also blending in interactive questions, discussion topics, and practical exercises. The “Praying Together” equipping class had four main goals. The first goal was to clearly define *corporate prayer*. The second goal was to establish a biblical foundation for corporate prayer. The third goal was to understand the personal and corporate impact of corporate prayer. The fourth and final goal was to demonstrate the practice of praying together. Each of the six sessions was planned and written in such a way to accomplish these articulated and promoted goals.

Session 1 served as an introductory class, laying out a road map for where the sessions would take us. Terms and definitions, such as *corporate prayer* and *united prayer*, were established. These introductions revealed that the focus of the first three sessions would be to form a biblical and theological basis for corporate prayer, emphasizing a main observation that God works mightily in and through churches that pray together. The introductions correspondingly revealed that the focus for the final three sessions would be to observe the disciple-making nature and benefits of corporate prayer, highlighting that corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. The opening segment allowed for exposing the connection between the mission given to the early disciples and summarizing their subsequent prayer activity in the book of Acts, which led to an evaluation of FBC’s corporate and personal commitment to similar activities. The session’s last segment focused on the first point of the biblical and theological basis by reading and studying Acts 1–2: God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together.

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 4.

Session 2 continued the focus on the biblical and theological basis for corporate prayer: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together. The class walked together through Acts 2:42-47, observing the corporate commitments of the early church, which included praying together. Verse 47 describes the effective result of the communal practices, revealing that the Lord adds new believers to churches that pray together. This class continued to study in chapters 4 and 5, learning that God not only grows churches numerically, but also in depth and maturity. In the face of threats and persecution, the church did not pray for protection in chapter 4, but instead for faithfulness and boldness. In the following chapter, the effectiveness of their prayers was realized as God faithfully answered by maturing them in both witness and holiness, demonstrating that God matures believers in churches that pray together. This session began the exercises at the end of the meeting time of actually putting corporate prayer into practice together for an extended time, asking the Lord to add new believers to our number as well as grant maturity to the church family.

Session 3 was the final class observing God working mightily in and through churches that pray together as demonstrated in the book of Acts. By studying the posture and actions of the believers in the early church found in Acts 1:15-26 and 6:1-7, we were able to witness that God directs decision-making in churches that pray together. These narrative passages communicated that followers placed a strong dependence on God and possessed incredible belief in His sovereign hand, which allowed for the class to reflect on whether these characteristics describe FBC in our decision-making. The final passage studied in Acts was chapters 13–14, where we found that God multiplies the ministry of churches that unite in prayer. As the church of Antioch faithfully prayed, the Lord multiplied churches in other locations. The entire Acts narrative had not seen a movement of this magnitude to this point, but following devotion to prayer, God answered in a mighty way. The practice of praying together concluded this session, which found the class asking



the Lord to guide FBC in decision-making as well as multiplying the ministry of FBC in our community and beyond.

Session 4 began the final three sessions, which focused on the disciple-making nature of corporate prayer. Through an introduction to this shift in class direction, I highlighted that the disciples viewed prayer life together as necessary in the discipleship process of the local church because Jesus prioritized corporate prayer as He disciplined them. Following the introduction, the emphasis turned toward two main benefits of praying together in the local church: unity and God-centeredness. As God's people pray, their hearts become intertwined, and at the same time, He combats the consistent struggle of self-centeredness, redirecting their affections toward Him and the interests of others. The session concluded with hearts joining together in prayer for a unified church and a removal of self-centeredness across our congregation.

Session 5 was a continuation of viewing corporate prayer as a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. The first segment of this class focused on how corporate prayer helps combat the obstacles of fear and apathy, ultimately reorienting the hearts of believers to the mission of Jesus. The second segment took the opportunity not only to identify the multitude of commands in the New Testament regarding how believers should live among one another, but also observe how praying together undergirds obedience to these explicit commands. The class concluded with a time of personal and corporate reflection toward FBC's mission culture as well as the status of our community life. This time was followed by praying together for God's hand at work in these areas.

Session 6 was the final class. The main focal point was highlighting the ways in which corporate prayer disciplines other less mature believers in their personal prayer lives. Many would describe their personal prayer times as weak and distracted, yet most churches forsake or neglect one of the best tools for teaching them how to pray: praying together! Following the discussion of this final disciple-making benefit, there was a review of the main points covered over the course of all the sessions, including a time of

testimony regarding the main takeaways for each person. The final session concluded in the same manner as the previous classes, joining together in prayer, asking the Lord to grow and enhance the personal and corporate prayer lives of FBC.

### **Curriculum Panel Review**

After completion of the equipping class curriculum, I provided either a hard copy or digital version of all the sessions to an expert panel to read, review, and analyze using the curriculum evaluation rubric.<sup>5</sup> This rubric allowed them to assess the relevancy, biblical faithfulness, clarity, and practicality of the curriculum. Upon attaining a grade of 90 percent on indicators meeting or exceeding the level of sufficiency, the curriculum was ready to be presented in class sessions. If the evaluations did not meet that level, then the content was to be revised until meeting or exceeding the aforementioned percentage. The panel of experts included the following five men: Paul Strahan, Derry Billingsley, John Thacker, Greg Faulls, and Jamus Edwards. Paul Strahan is the pastor of FBC and has a Doctor of Ministry from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Derry Billingsley is FBC's Minister of Worship and holds a Master of Church Music from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. John Thacker is an attorney, life-long member of FBC, and the chairman of deacons. Greg Faulls is the pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky, and holds a PhD from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Jamus Edwards is the pastor of Pleasant Valley Community Church in Owensboro, Kentucky, and holds a PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

## **Implementation Phase**

### **Invitation and Registration**

Having prepared for the equipping class, I sent out hard copy and digital invitations to the target group identified previously in this chapter. The invitation explained

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<sup>5</sup> See appendix 1.

the purpose of the class, the desire for their participation, the details related to the class, and instructions for registration. I coordinated a digital registration to ensure sufficient participation numbers and developed a roster for taking attendance each week. This method of registration also allowed for the intake of particular information to pave the way for efficient future communication.

### **Administering the Pre-Class Survey**

Prior to beginning the curriculum, once participants gathered for the first session of the equipping class, I administered the first round of the BCPS,<sup>6</sup> which included an agreement to participate. I gave specific instructions for completing the survey, particularly highlighting the need to provide an anonymous four-digit code on the front page to use again on the post-class survey for accurate parallel comparison. I suggested the participants find a written or digital method for denoting their code for reference on their final survey. Additionally, some registered participants were unable to attend the first session, so I provided them with either a hard copy or digital version of the BCPS and instructed them to complete the survey and return it to me prior to viewing or attending any of the sessions.

### **Conducting Sessions**

Upon securing the initially completed surveys, I conducted the six sessions following the previously written curriculum closely. At the beginning of each session, I reminded participants that I would digitally provide them with curriculum notes after each class so that they did not feel pressured to keep up with taking personal notes. I also provided them with these notes after each class to give them an outlet to review and reflect on the content at their own pace. Furthermore, I secured an audio/visual technician from FBC to record and digitally upload each class. I then provided the link to participants each

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 2.

week so they could stay on pace with the group in the event of their absence as well as give participants who did attend the ability to watch or listen again at their own pace.

### **Administering the Post-Class Survey**

At the conclusion of the final teaching session, I administered the second round of the BCPS. The survey was identical to the first one taken before the classes began. The goal was to have parallel surveys for those participating in order to track their growth and the impact of the equipping class. I gave specific instructions upon handing out the final survey, particularly highlighting the necessity of providing the same four-digit code previously utilized on the initial survey for parallel analysis. As with the initial survey, I provided a hard copy or digital version for those who were absent for the final session, instructing them to view each teaching session prior to taking the final survey.

## **Follow-Up Phase**

### **Survey Data Analysis**

A data analysis was conducted following the administration of the BCPS at the conclusion of the equipping class. Using the provided anonymous codes, the pre- and post-class surveys were paired, and each answer was entered into an excel spreadsheet for comparison to determine any changes in the participants' knowledge and affections regarding biblical corporate prayer. A *t*-test for dependent samples was used as an objective data assessment to discern if there were statistically significant improvements from the initial survey results to those of the concluding survey. The level of significance for the *t*-test was set at .05.

### **Interviews**

One of the initial intentions of the ministry project was not only to significantly impact the corporate prayer knowledge of participants, but also enhance their affections toward the practice of the corporate spiritual discipline in the context of the local church. Questions were strategically placed in the BCPS to attempt to gauge the matter of

affections, but survey questions alone with Likert style responses often prove insufficient to capture the meditations and intentions of the heart. Understanding that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart (Luke 6:45), I found it prudent to conduct interviews with five active participants of the equipping class. Those interviewed were not chosen as a result of any ranking or status regarding the affection-related questions on the survey but were instead chosen at random as a means of protecting the anonymity of participants and their survey responses. The interviews were conducted in an informal matter, gathering feedback through a conversational structure, which allowed participants to speak voluntarily on topics and significant impacts that most stood out to them through their participation in the classes as well as the actual practicing of corporate prayer together.

### **Strategic Plan**

The writing and project implementation to this point allowed for much reflection on the current and potential future state of corporate prayer at FBC. I was able to orchestrate a strategic plan<sup>7</sup> for the future as a result of observing the context of corporate prayer at FBC, writing a biblical and theological basis for corporate prayer based on the book of Acts, writing on the topic of the disciple-making nature and benefits of corporate prayer in the local church, developing an equipping curriculum, conducting six sessions of classes, and analyzing the impact of the class. I approached the strategic planning with intentions to identify areas of impact, denote specific steps toward corporate prayer enhancement, and articulate particular target dates for the completion of the steps. Prior to addressing each of these elements, a vision statement was created to communicate the focus of pursuing a culture shift regarding corporate prayer at FBC through elevating the frequency and biblical substance of praying together. Additionally, core commitments were drafted that would undergird any corporate prayer work in the targeted areas.

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<sup>7</sup> See appendix 5.

Two common environments of corporate nature were part of the targeted areas of focus because they were already in place at FBC: Sunday school classes and worship services. The third identified area of impact was a dedicated prayer meeting. The church has a lunch prayer meeting each Wednesday, but this primarily targets the senior adult population as lunch is also provided in combination with the prayer time. This meeting mainly intends to provide ministry opportunities for those who may feel hesitant to return for the usual Wednesday evening programming because of time and darkness. Without a plan for a regular prayer meeting for the church family as a whole, this became an obvious targeted gathering opportunity for corporate prayer.

In the area of the Sunday school classes, the plan centered around providing leaders and classes a monthly prayer calendar to supplement and accompany the prayer list of each class. The calendar would suggest a prayer emphasis each week that would shift the theme of prayer from mere physical matters to spiritual and ministry matters, attempting to engage personal and corporate prayer needs. These calendars would not only be provided for adult classes, but also modified for the preschool, children, and youth departments.

For the targeted area of worship gatherings, the plan focused on the development of a weekly prayer schedule. The schedule would incorporate elements intended to bring variety and balance to the church's prayer life together in the services. The plan also suggested scheduling biblical passages to guide the prayer time as well as coordinating monthly testimonies of answered prayers as a way to celebrate God's mighty hand at work in and through the congregation.

In the area of the dedicated prayer meetings, the strategic plan outlined the steps to develop a monthly prayer meeting at FBC. The orchestration of the schedule, details, and communication methods regarding the new meetings would be handled by designated church leaders on the staff, including the senior pastor. The plan also suggested particular format elements to consider when developing the monthly prayer meeting

agenda, including worship music, Scripture readings, testimonies, biblical teaching, methods for prayer, prayer emphases, and the inclusion/exclusion of requests.

### **Strategic Plan Panel Review**

After completion of the strategic plan, I provided either a hard copy or digital version of the plan to a panel for them to read, review, and analyze through the use of the strategic plan evaluation rubric.<sup>8</sup> This rubric allowed them to assess the biblical faithfulness and functionality of the plan, as well as the communication processes and actions steps for implementation. Upon attaining a grade of 90 percent on indicators meeting or exceeding the level of sufficiency, the plan was ready to move forward and put into action. If the evaluations did not meet that level, then the content was to be revised until meeting or exceeding the aforementioned percentage. The panel, all FBC leadership, included the following three men: Paul Strahan, Derry Billingsley, and John Thacker. Paul Strahan is the pastor of FBC and has a Doctor of Ministry from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Derry Billingsley is FBC's Minister of Worship and holds a Master of Church Music from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. John Thacker is an attorney, life-long member of FBC, and the chairman of deacons.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the development and implementation of the corporate prayer equipping class as well as the development of a corporate prayer strategic plan for implementation at FBC. The purpose of the class was to enhance not only the knowledge of participants from the congregation, but also their affections toward the practice of the corporate spiritual discipline in the context of the local church. The purpose of the strategic plan was to identify target areas for corporate prayer enhancement and articulate particular steps and dates for future implementation as a means to elevate the frequency and

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<sup>8</sup> See appendix 3.

substance of praying together at FBC. The next and final chapter will evaluate the project results and provide concluding theological and personal reflections.



## CHAPTER 5

### MINISTRY PROJECT EVALUATION

In this final chapter, the ministry project will be evaluated. Initially, the purpose of the project will be assessed, discerning whether the purpose was clearly fulfilled. Second, the project's goals will be revisited and the evaluation of actions, as well as data from the pre- and post-class surveys, will determine whether they have been met. Third, the strengths and weaknesses of the project will be considered, promptly followed by a treatment of what I would do differently with the project. The final segments of this chapter will include theological and personal reflections from the entire project process. This effort of reflection seeks to serve multiple parties by not only benefiting myself as a summary to the work, but also as an insight and guide for those who would desire to utilize any and/or all the content for the enhancement of corporate prayer in their local church context.

#### **Evaluation of the Project's Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to enhance corporate prayer at First Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky. To develop a targeted purpose, I needed to analyze where FBC had been, was at the time of the analysis, and potentially could be in the future. The church has been in a slow numerical decline over the course of the last few decades. New members and baptisms do happen, but they do so at a much lower rate than in the past. Most notably, the number of adult baptisms has been low for a several years, with most new adult memberships in the congregation coming as a result of church transfers. FBC leadership was acutely aware of the situation and felt led to refocus the congregation in 2017 with a clear and focused new mission statement intended to reflect the mission of Jesus found in Matthew 28.

Even in the midst of much branding, communicating, and developing of activities geared toward engagement in the new mission, the congregation failed to see a significant momentum toward living out the mission. Through much biblical reflection and discernment, I determined that a lack of purposeful corporate prayer stood as one of the significant barriers to embodying the mission. Several contextual factors led to this observation and provided rationale for establishing the purpose of enhancing corporate prayer at FBC.

Determining the long-term fulfillment of this stated purpose is difficult without the clarity of future hindsight, but with the perspective of the duration of the ministry project before me, I can conclude that corporate prayer has been enhanced at FBC. The fulfillment of the project's purpose will prayerfully and hopefully help build momentum toward the shared mission of the church in the days ahead.

A primary reason for the fulfillment conclusion has been the statistical and anecdotal observation of the participants involved in the equipping class. Through the first round of the survey, many responded with healthy and right responses toward the necessity of corporate prayer in the local church, yet the actions of FBC do not reflect or parallel with these perspectives from the most prominent lay leaders in the congregation, consisting of Sunday school leaders, deacons, and the spouses of each group. As a result of the class content and corporate prayer exercises, conversations with many of the participants revealed a newfound affection toward and confidence in the act of praying together. What became evident through a review of the post-class survey data, which will be covered later in this chapter, as well as the interviews—conducted for a deeper discernment of participant affection changes—was that participants generally believe that praying together is something that God desires of His people and will work mightily through as they come to Him in unison, but for various reasons have neglected to the detriment of the church and its mission. These revelations led a number of participants confessing to me their resolve simultaneously to participate more intentionally in corporate prayer offerings in

the future as well as lead with greater purpose in the areas where they provide prayer oversight. Gaining these insights allowed me to say with confidence that corporate prayer has been enhanced at FBC and will continue to be in the coming days.

### **Evaluation of the Project's Goals**

Laying out specific goals early in the process of the project helped to formulate a trajectory for carrying out the purpose of enhancing corporate prayer at FBC. The four goals that I set were not only helpful at the onset of the project, but also brought about a framework to build on in the midst of the work. Discerning the overall impact of the project is directly connected with an objective evaluation of the goals and determining if they have been met. The following is a sequential review of each of the four goals.

#### **Goal 1**

The first goal of the project was to develop a curriculum that focused on the biblical description and practice of corporate prayer. I wrote this curriculum utilizing much of the content developed in chapters 2 and 3. The curriculum covered two basic themes. The first was following the basic instances of corporate prayer from the early church found in the book of Acts and how God worked mightily in and through their fidelity to the corporate spiritual discipline. The second basic theme was highlighting the practical benefits of praying together as a church by observing the disciple-making nature of corporate prayer. In addition, the curriculum weaved in discussion questions and actual prayer guides for the class to exercise in its time together. The curriculum was delivered to an expert panel for evaluation. After reading and reviewing the written curriculum, the panel used a rubric to assess various categories of desired substance. The panel graded the curriculum with 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators meeting or exceeding the sufficiency level. The first goal was met and completed upon the return of the finalized rubric documents from the panel. Additionally, each of the panel members provided written feedback with encouragement and opportunities for improvement. One panel member, a

pastor from outside FBC, even requested my teaching of the material at his church in the future, recognizing the need for a corporate prayer culture change in that congregation.

## **Goal 2**

The second goal of this project was to increase FBC's knowledge of corporate prayer by implementing the developed curriculum. Once the material was found sufficient by the expert panel, I utilized it in teaching dozens of FBC lay leaders over six sessions. The goal's impact was measured for success by conducting a *t*-test for dependent samples using the participant responses from the pre- and post-class surveys. The surveys before and after the class were parallel and structured the responses in the Likert model to allow for responses to be given particular values for comparison. The level of significance for the *t*-test was set at .05. Based on the *t*-test for dependent samples, there was a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-class BCPS scores ( $t_{(30)} = 5.636$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). This result indicates the second goal was successfully met and completed.

## **Goal 3**

The third goal of this project was to increase FBC's desire to participate in corporate prayer by implementing the developed curriculum, particularly the segments of practicing the discipline. This goal was measured in two formats. The first way this goal was measured was through the statistical assessment of the BCPS, which was covered in the previous goal. The BCPS not only contained questions pertaining to the knowledge of corporate prayer, but also included questions to help evaluate their affections toward the spiritual discipline. As previously mentioned, there was a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-class BCPS scores. Additionally, knowing that the affections one possesses toward an action such as corporate prayer are difficult to discern through analytical data from a survey, this goal was also measured by interviewing five individuals at random who participated in the entirety of the class. By the results of the *t*-test and the

insights gained from the interviews, the affections toward and desire to participate in corporate prayer were increased at FBC, indicating the third goal was met and completed.

#### **Goal 4**

The fourth goal of the project was to develop a strategic plan for ongoing intentional corporate prayer at FBC. Following the work of FBC contextual analysis, writing chapters 2 and 3, developing a curriculum, teaching the equipping class, and reviewing the data of surveys and interviews, I was able to reflect on the future of corporate prayer at FBC and formulate a plan to continue the purpose of enhancing the spiritual discipline in the life of the church. I wrote the strategic plan in such a way as to impact the prayer of three corporate environments at FBC. The first was the Sunday school ministry, including classes of all ages. The second was the worship service, which includes everyone in the congregation. The third was the development of a new dedicated monthly prayer meeting, which would be a new environment for FBC. The plan developed particular action items, responsible parties, and specific timetables for completion for all three corporate spaces. Once the plan was crafted, it was measured by a panel of FBC church leaders, which included the pastor, the minister of worship, and the chairman of deacons. An evaluation rubric was utilized by this panel upon their reading and reviewing of the plan. The panel graded the strategic plan with 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators meeting or exceeding the sufficiency level. The panel also provided encouraging and constructive feedback with comments they submitted. The fourth goal was met and completed with the return of the finalized rubric documents from the panel.

#### **Strengths of the Project**

Throughout the development and implementation of this project, there were several obstacles to overcome. The most notable barrier arrived in the middle of the project: the Covid-19 global pandemic. Despite the various hurdles, I was able to identify five primary strengths of the project.

## **Praying Together**

Multiple parts of the project brought me joy, but none greater than the actual process of praying corporately with the class participants each session. The curriculum content biblically informed everyone present of the innerworkings and necessity for corporate prayer, but the sweetest and most impactful instances came when hearts joined together in conversation with the Lord. These experiences allowed for voluntary participation through the guided themes, revealing the Spirit-led affections of brothers and sisters in Christ. I am confident that I was not alone in cherishing these times of praying together, as I had participants from the class share their appreciation and love for these moments.

## **Biblical Grounding**

From the onset of the project, the work was saturated with Scripture. This grounding in the Bible undeniably strengthened the project as well as those who had the opportunity to participate in the sessions. The content of chapters 2 and 3, which also served as the predominant source for the curriculum, was derived from the Bible. Chapter 2 and the first half of the teaching sessions walked through highlighted passages from the first thirteen chapters of the book of Acts. Chapter 3 and the second half of the teaching sessions utilized themes from other authors writing on corporate prayer, but these writers notably grounded their work in biblical passages.

Pointing participants to the Word of God accomplished two main objectives. First, those sitting under the teaching were able to observe that the conclusions presented were not my opinions or perspectives but were instead the revelations and intentions God has for His people. Second, by walking methodically through passages in Acts together, participants learned how to read familiar narratives and chapters of the Bible in such a way to search intently for revelations they might have previously overlooked. Believers will never mine all the riches of God's Word, so it is important to learn how to place fresh lenses on those passages we have become so accustomed to hearing and reading.

## **Lay Leader Reminder**

The project targeted leaders in the congregation. Sunday school leaders and teachers from all age groups were invited, as well as the active deacons. Additionally, the spouses of each of these groups were invited. Having this roster of participants meant that many were going to be seasoned in the faith and exhibiting a certain level of maturity in their walk with the Lord. Even with these characteristics in place, leaders often need reminders of what is important and primary in their ministry labors. The equipping class served this exact purpose. The project took something quite commonly known for its biblical importance—corporate prayer—and reminded participants of its necessity for carrying out Jesus’s commission even though it can be and often is easily neglected. All believers need fresh reminders, and doing that for leaders at FBC will pave the way for impact beyond the project’s initial reach.

## **Future Plans**

One of the goals and main objectives toward the final portion of the project was to compile the knowledge gained throughout the work and craft a strategic plan for FBC that would enhance corporate prayer across the entire church. This step helped move the project from theoretical and isolated enhancement to concrete actions that will create environments for God’s people to come together in the Spirit and commune with Him and one another for the advancement of His kingdom. The true benefit of this work was the necessary conversations that occurred among leaders, particularly staff members. As these conversations transpired, excitement of the potential impact increased. The strategic plans are tangible, and humans are often energized by what can be seen and touched, but those in the conversations know that these plans allow for a culture in which the Spirit can show up in a mighty way!

## **Generational Impact**

As a father, I am consistently carrying the responsibility to disciple my children in the ways of the Lord. My wife and I know that we play the primary role in this

work, but we also know that the church is a partner with us. One of the areas of growth that each generation demands is in the area of prayer, specifically in praying with others. This project has two points at which it not only targets the corporate prayer of adults and the broader church in general, but also focuses on the youth of FBC. The first is that Sunday school class leaders from all age groups were invited to participate in the equipping class, meaning that the teachers of some of the youngest in the church were studying and experiencing the sessions. The prayer is that their knowledge and affections for praying together now overflows into the leadership of their young classes in the days ahead. Second, the strategic plan outlines action steps to provide each Sunday school class with a prayer guide to be used in their gatherings, specifically including plans to modify the guides for the youngest classes at FBC. With informed and equipped leaders, the intent is that the next generation is joining together in prayer each time they meet with one another, strengthening the corporate prayer life of FBC in the present and for years to come.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

At the conclusion of any project, reflection allows for not only the strengths to be highlighted, but also the weaknesses. This project's strengths have already been covered, but two weaknesses became evident after reflecting on and analyzing the entirety of the work.

#### **Second Chair Leadership**

In the life of the local church, there are distinct differences in leading from the chair of the pastor and that of an associate ministry role. I am blessed with the opportunity and responsibility of leading in many areas of our congregation as a ministry staff member, but the voice of the lead/senior pastor at FBC rightly carries much more weight than others. With this reality in mind, a weakness of this project was that the very nature of the work addressed a spiritual discipline that engages the entire church, yet the target audience of the project was limited in scope to leaders in my particular area of ministry.



The teaching of the project could have been presented to the entire congregation in one of two arenas: the Sunday morning worship service or a designated class. Having six sessions covered in a sermon series on Sunday mornings would have displaced the pastor from his regular preaching duties for far too many weeks, so this approach was not an ideal option. Inviting the entire church to return at a designated time for a separate class would not have been feasible as the likelihood of their returning in significant attendance numbers would be low. For the purposes of modification in light of the inability to speak to the entire congregation about corporate prayer, the next best option was to speak directly to the leaders who would engage them in the discipline throughout the discipleship ministry of FBC.

### **Prayer Gap**

Another weakness of this project was found in the gap between the equipping class sessions and the development of the strategic plan for prayer action moving forward. At the time the class sessions concluded, there was an excitement and refreshed energy toward praying together that ended abruptly with the class. Plans were being set in motion for future action steps toward consistent and substantive prayer gatherings, but the gap between the two diminished the momentum that the equipping class and the practicing of praying together had developed.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

As the one leading such an important endeavor to revitalize a healthy church practice at FBC, the regrets of the process have a way of standing out. Through reflecting on the project, I identified three items I would change.

### **Continue Prayer Meetings**

As noted in the project weaknesses, a prayer gathering gap was created between the end of the equipping class and crafting actions steps in the strategic plan to jumpstart a dedicated monthly prayer meeting. If I were to return to the end of the equipping class,

I would have begun having a monthly prayer meeting at that time. The detailed plans would have been valuable for a meeting to engage the entire congregation in the future, but an invitation to those who participated in the class would have been wonderful. The target group would have been limited, as with the class, but the opportunity to continue the momentum of praying together in the class sessions could have proved fruitful in their ongoing leadership throughout the church.

### **Provide Resource List**

Embarking on a project such as this and preparing to lead others to increase their understanding and desire for corporate prayer requires much reading. Over the extended amount of time that I worked on developing the concept for the project and fleshing it out, I engaged a great number of helpful resources in the area of corporate prayer. During the equipping class, I was able to share several quotes from resources I had utilized. I also had the wisdom to provide my teaching notes for participants. If I could return to the time of the equipping class, I would generate a resource list that would point participants to the most beneficial resources for their own deeper study.

### **Improve Class Audio**

One of the steps taken to mitigate the risk of absences during the equipping class was providing video/audio of each session for the participants. If they did miss for any reason, they would be able to view the content digitally and hopefully gain the impact of each session for the desired change in their knowledge and affections toward corporate prayer. The video and sound quality were excellently handled by a technician at FBC, but I made the mistake of not requesting microphones for use during the extended times of praying together at the end of each session. Those who watched sessions they had missed lamented the fact they were unable to hear the prayers of their brothers and sisters in the class. If I could return to planning the logistics of the class sessions, I would have ensured microphones in multiple locations where we met to enhance the sound quality

for those in the room and those watching virtually. Recognizing this now helps to inform my logistical plans for future prayer meetings in the same space.

### **Theological Reflections**

Concluding a project of this magnitude allows for much to be said regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and changes one would make. As much value as those reflections possess, they pale in comparison to the recognition of theological and spiritual markers attained through the work. This project has led me to three main theological reflections.

#### **Mighty Prayer in Acts**

The burden and focus of corporate prayer at FBC began with one simple action: reading the book of Acts over and over. Shortly before beginning this project process, I was working through reading the New Testament, and upon arriving at Acts, I decided the narrative nature of the book warranted reading it all at once. After reading it through the first time, I was captivated by the flow of God's working throughout, which led me to read it repeatedly. As I read it through multiple times, I began to notice a theme throughout the first half of the book that had not previously stood out to me. The theme became so evident that I could not neglect the magnitude of its impact on those believers and the potential for impact in the lives of churches today. Just prior to the major movements of God in the first half of the book of Acts, the believers were found praying together. At each turn in the narrative, I could not help but to see their praying together and then God's answering. I was convinced then—and am even more deeply today at the conclusion of this project—that God works mightily in and through churches that pray together!

#### **Disciple-Making Prayer**

As the Minister of Discipleship at FBC, I am regularly in study and conversation with others in ministry regarding methods for making disciples who make disciples. A number of common actions are highlighted for their necessary inclusion in the process.

Notably absent from many of those conversations is the practice of praying together. It is not as though prayer is totally neglected. Nearly every discipleship book or study will include it in the elements which a group should practice, but rarely is it elevated to a key and primary action in the process. Through reading and studying the actions of the disciples in the book of Acts, I am convinced they were merely discipling others in the way that Jesus disciplined them. The believers in Acts prayed together often and with particular substance, which communicates to me that Jesus prayed with his disciples often and with particular substance. If FBC is going to make disciples who make disciples, then we must view corporate prayer as a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life.

### **Filled and Fueled by the Spirit**

As a church that desires to carry out the mission of Jesus and see disciples made, matured, and multiplied for the glory of God, we identify with numerous other Bible-believing churches like us. At the same time, FBC finds itself unbelievably busy with movement to see that mission fulfilled, but often have little tangible evidence of fruit from the flurry of activity. I, along with other leaders, often encounter the question of why efforts and plentiful resources directed toward those efforts see a diminishing return. Through the study of Acts and other sources for this project's work, the answer lies in the simplicity of dependence upon God. The believers of Acts were not effective because of their intelligence, skills, resources, or hard work, but instead because they prayed together and asked God to fill them and fuel them for the mission. FBC will not be effective in carrying out the mission of Jesus because of our intelligence, skills, resources, or hard work, but instead because of our dependence on a sovereign God through praying together to fill us with His Spirit and fuel us for His kingdom's work in the days to come.

## **Personal Reflections**

This project was quite the journey and was ultimately a joy to complete. At the same time, the project challenged me personally in several ways, contributing to my growth and personal development as a follower of Jesus and leader in His local church known as FBC Owensboro.

### **Writing and Productivity**

The completion of this work is by far the most in-depth study and writing project in my academic and ministry life. As a result, I was challenged and therefore grew in a few different areas. First, I learned about myself as a writer. I am a chunk writer, meaning that I work best in larger blocks of time rather than frequent smaller frames of attention toward the endeavor. The benefit to this style is that I can complete a great amount of work in a short amount of time, but the drawback is that this style lends itself to longer periods of stagnancy in between the times of labor, which can negatively impact the continuity of writing from section to section. I found myself waiting for ideal conditions to begin each larger block of dedicated writing, but ultimately concluded through this project that favorable conditions never come. Tomorrow can promise many opportunities but can never guarantee the right conditions or situation for extended periods of work. This lesson will serve me well in future ministry work, challenging me to work in the moments I am given even when not ideal, realizing future moments may not be any better.

Second, I grew as a writer through this process. The magnitude of this work forced me to write smaller segments with the larger project in mind, leading me to bring greater depth of thought to my outlining prior to writing. This step enhanced my clarity and pace once I took up the task of actually formulating thoughts and writing. This lesson will serve me well in future ministry, particularly the work of sermon writing.

### **Personal and Corporate Prayer**

The genesis of this project has been covered in a previous section of this chapter, but ultimately found itself in discovering the mighty acts of God following the persistent

and dependent prayer of believers in Acts. Upon that reading and understanding, my burden for prayer grew. The burden grew not only for my personal prayer life, but also for that of our entire church. That initial challenge from Acts only intensified as I dug deeper in study and research for this project. I have been challenged for greater frequency and substance in my own prayer as well as a cultivation of hunger for praying with others. My recognition of what God can and will do in those moments of joining our hearts before Him has grown. With an enhanced hunger and recognition, I am convinced that my personal and corporate prayer practices will never be the same as a result of this project.

### **Ministry Leadership**

Just as my practices will never be the same, neither will my ministry leadership as a result of this project. The change I had hoped and prayed would come from leading this project was wrought in a burden from reading and meditating on Scripture. The Lord desires for His church to be led to the Word and by the Word, and this entire project process has reinforced that truth for me. The Lord developed a prayer burden in me from the Bible that guided my leadership of fellow leaders throughout FBC. His doing this has impressed the formula on my mind and heart for the rest of the days I have in ministry. His Word is personally and corporately life-giving, and I have no other source to lean on for the revitalization of His bride.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to enhance corporate prayer at FBC. Four goals were developed and pursued to fulfill the stated project purpose, hoping to impact positively the church's knowledge and affections toward praying together. These goals were met, and the desire is for the enhanced corporate prayer life of FBC to continue in the days to come with the execution of the strategic plan's specific action steps. The changes have not only been observed in the church, but also in me. My prayer life has been changed as well as my resolve to pray with others. If FBC will follow in the model

of the early church found in the book of Acts, passionately and faithfully joining their hearts before God in prayer, God Himself will be faithful, filling us with His Spirit and fueling us to fulfill His mission.

## APPENDIX 1

### CORPORATE PRAYER CURRICULUM EVALUATION

The following evaluation was sent to a panel of the pastor, the minister of music, the chairman of deacons, and two other pastors from like-minded churches in the community. The panel evaluated the curriculum's content to ensure it is biblically faithful, clear, relevant, and practically applicable.



Name of Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Corporate Prayer Curriculum Evaluation Rubric					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The curriculum is clearly relevant to the issues of corporate prayer.					
The curriculum is faithful to the Bible's teaching on corporate prayer.					
The content of the curriculum is theologically sound.					
The main proposition of each session in the curriculum is clearly stated.					
The points of each session in the curriculum clearly support the main proposition.					
Each session in the curriculum contains practical application.					
The curriculum is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.					
Overall, the curriculum clearly presents the biblical approach to corporate prayer.					

Please include any additional comments regarding the curriculum below:

## APPENDIX 2

### BIBLICAL CORPORATE PRAYER SURVEY

#### **Agreement to Participate**

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to enhance corporate prayer in the life of the church. This research is being conducted by Wesley Dunn for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project.<sup>1</sup> In this research, you will answer the questions to the best of your ability before and after the implementation of the project. Identification is required in order to align the pre- and post-test surveys. Please submit a four-digit code and remember the number for the subsequent survey. By using the anonymous code, any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses.

*Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of this survey and checking the appropriate box below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate

Date:

Anonymous four-digit code:

Gender:

Age:

Directions: Please answer the following question by placing a check next to the most appropriate description.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a member of FBC.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am not a member of FBC.

\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> This survey adapted some material from Brandt Lyon's "Prayer and Evangelism Assessment Survey" from Brandt Timothy Lyon, "Teaching the Members of Twelve Oaks Baptist Church in Paducah, Kentucky, to Depend on the Holy Spirit through Prayer for Effective Evangelism" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 92-95.

Directions: Respond to the following statements by circling the answer that most accurately depicts your opinion using the following scale:

- SD = Strongly Disagree  
 D = Disagree  
 DS = Disagree Somewhat  
 AS = Agree Somewhat  
 A = Agree  
 SA = Strongly Agree

- |                                                                                                                     |    |   |    |    |   |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. The Bible instructs the church to unite in prayer together.                                                      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. The New Testament illustrates the effectiveness of the church uniting in prayer with historical accounts.        | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. I desire to hear others praying for me.                                                                          | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. I lack confidence in praying in front of others.                                                                 | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. I regularly join with other believers to pray.                                                                   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. I can recall examples of churches in the Bible uniting in prayer for specific requests.                          | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. I have heard biblical teaching/preaching regarding the corporate prayer life of the church.                      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. I want to have more opportunities to gather with the church to pray.                                             | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I rarely join with the members of our church to pray.                                                            | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I have seen God answer the prayers of a gathering in which I have participated.                                 | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. God demonstrates His mighty power in the scriptures when churches unite in prayer together.                     | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. Jesus' mission for the church is to make disciples.                                                             | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. I would actively participate in gatherings that prioritize a plan for prayer that focuses on spiritual matters. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. The prayer gatherings I am part of predominantly pray for physical needs.                                       | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

15. The prayer gatherings I am part of predominantly pray for spiritual matters.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. The early church of the New Testament lacked efficiency and effectiveness in making disciples when they were praying together.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17. God gives more of His Spirit to churches that pray together.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. I would like to experience a movement of the Holy Spirit in a corporate prayer gathering.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. Our church has an urgency to gather intentionally to pray for spiritual matters of the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. Our church has an urgency to gather intentionally to pray for the ministry effectiveness of the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. God answers a church's corporate prayer for salvation of lost people.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. God enhances the spiritual maturity of a congregation that unites to pray for it.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. I would like to see our church offer a regular prayer meeting for the whole church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. Our church offers ample opportunity for corporate prayer.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. I learned how to pray better by praying on my own.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26. God sends new leaders and servants to churches that unite to pray for them.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
27. God expands the ministry of churches that pray together.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
28. I desire to pray more with other members of our church for the salvation of the lost.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
29. I actively disciple others in prayer by praying with them.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
30. Our church should regularly meet together to pray for the salvation of those far from God.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
31. A church that prays together is more unified.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

32. Focus is placed more on God and less on self when a church prays together.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
33. Prayer together with our church will have limited impact on the congregation's growth in witness and holiness.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
34. Our church should regularly pray together for our growth in living the Christian life.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
35. Our church should pray together for the effectiveness of our ministries.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
36. Church members care better for one another when they unite regularly in prayer.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
37. Praying together holds church members accountable to one another.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
38. Spending time as a church in prayer will take away from the time we could be actively participating in missions.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
39. Our church should regularly pray together for God to multiply our congregation through church planting and missions.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
40. I am compelled to live more for Christ when I hear others praying.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

### APPENDIX 3

#### CORPORATE PRAYER STRATEGIC PLAN EVALUATION

The following evaluation was sent to a panel of the pastor, the church's ministerial staff, and the chairman of deacons. This panel evaluated the plan's content to ensure it was biblically faithful and functional for FBC. The panel also evaluated the comprehensive nature of the communication processes and action steps for implementation.

Name of Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Corporate Prayer Strategic Plan Evaluation Rubric					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The plan contributes positively to corporate prayer at FBC.					
The plan is faithful to the Bible's teaching on corporate prayer.					
The plan considers the interest of FBC as a whole.					
The plan functions in coordination with FBC's various leaders and ministries.					
The plan incorporates participation by multiple generations of FBC.					
The plan details the communication/promotion process to the church as a whole.					
The plan is thorough in its explanation of action steps for implementation.					
Overall, the plan clearly moves FBC toward a more biblical approach to corporate prayer.					

Please include any additional comments regarding the plan below:

## APPENDIX 4

### BIBLICAL CORPORATE PRAYER EQUIPPING CLASS CURRICULUM

The following is the curriculum used for teaching the six sessions of the equipping class at FBC. These notes were developed as a guide and were followed closely during the administration of the class, but as with any teaching opportunity, relevant illustrations and applications were used as a result of contextualization.





## **Praying Together**

### **Equipping Class**

Wesley S. Dunn | Minister of Discipleship

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this equipping class geared to enhance the understanding and practice of corporate prayer in the life of the church. The six sessions are intended to focus our attention on the life of the early church in the book of Acts and the practical implementation and benefits of their practices today. As a participant, you will take a survey on the first and last day of class. Also, please do your best to attend all six of the sessions in person even though digital versions will be made available. The relational aspect of the learning process, including the time of actually praying together, is nearly impossible to replicate through digital means.

#### **Schedule/Agenda**

- Session 1:
  - Introduction & Definitions
  - God grants His Spirit
- Session 2
  - God adds new believers
  - God matures believers
- Session 3
  - God directs decision-making
  - God multiplies ministry
- Session 4
  - Enriching unity
  - Heightening God-centeredness
- Session 5
  - Heart reorientation to the mission
  - Carrying out one-anothers
- Session 6
  - Developing/enhancing personal prayer
  - Conclusion

### **Class Goals**

1. To clearly define corporate prayer
2. To establish a biblical foundation for corporate prayer
3. To understand the personal and corporate impact of corporate prayer
4. To demonstrate the practice of praying together

### **Class Instructions**

- Please arrive early and be ready to begin at the announced starting time.
- Don't hesitate to ask questions!
- Be ready and willing to participate when questions are asked or assignments are given. Active involvement expedites the learning process!
- Please do your best to attend each session as the content of subsequent sessions hinges on the others. If you are unable to be present for a session, please access the digital version of the class soon after it is made available.



## Session 1

### Introduction | Definitions | God Grants His Spirit

#### Survey

- Introduction & overview of the survey tool.
- Present the Biblical Corporate Prayer Survey (includes the Agreement to Participate letter).
- Provide instructions for taking the survey:
  - Directions for the answer scale
  - Be as straightforward and accurate as possible on each answer, but do not dwell on a particular question for an extended period of time.
  - Please do not discuss questions/answers with others in order to maintain the integrity of the survey.
- Allow 10 minutes to complete the survey.
- Provide instructions and access to the survey to those not present but with plans to attend the remainder of the sessions.
  - Do not observe any of the digitally provided sessions prior to taking and turning in the initial survey.

#### Introduction

- Opening prayer
- Read Matthew 28:18-20
  - According to this passage, what was Jesus' clear mission for the church?
  - This has led FBC Owensboro to adopt a motto statement of "Making, Maturing, and Multiplying Disciples for the Glory of God."
    - Explain the connection of each of these phases to Jesus' commission.
- No matter the church, at its core of purpose and function should be disciple-making!
  - This is most notably found in the early church observed in the book of Acts.
    - The early church, in the face of extreme persecution, went from a few hundred followers of Christ to thousands in a short amount of time!
- How did the early church effectively live out Jesus' mission?
  - Was it a result of their clever wisdom?
  - Was it a result of their unique skills?
  - Was it a result of their own incredible power of persuasion?
- The early church found in Acts was effective in carrying out Jesus' mission as a result of their dependence upon God working in and through them by the power of His Spirit!

- How did these followers most notably demonstrate their dependence?
  - Through their prayer with one another
- Churches, including FBC, desire to carry out Jesus' commission with similar effectiveness, but the question that remains is how the church can do it.
  - Digital media, libraries, and book stores are full of sure-fire methods and ideas for how to grow the church and carry out ministry that will be effective, but the Bible (particularly in Acts) demonstrates a clear picture that a foundational pillar of the early church was a pattern of corporate prayer.
  - FBC will have kingdom effectiveness if its corporate prayer life is patterned after that of the early church in Acts.
- The six sessions will look to Acts to observe how the early church prayed, what they prayed, when they prayed, and what happened as a result of their praying together. We will look at what God did among them and through them, and we will apply that to the church today.
  - Two major observations that we will dive further into:
    - God works mightily in and through churches that pray together
    - Corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship & growth in the Christian life

## **Definitions**

- Corporate Prayer
  - Also known as congregational<sup>1</sup> or mutual<sup>2</sup> prayer
  - The act of praying with others<sup>3</sup>
  - Happens in various venues: worship services, Sunday School classes, Bible studies, prayer meetings, or any other setting where Christians are coming together to pray
- United Prayer
  - Corporate prayer that is focused<sup>4</sup> and concerted<sup>5</sup>
  - Don Whitney: It is more than sitting in the same location with another and praying about the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *The Pastor's Book: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide to Pastoral Ministry*, ed. Douglas Sean O'Donnell (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 265.

<sup>2</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 166.

<sup>3</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor's Book*, 264.

<sup>5</sup> E. M. Bounds, *E M Bounds: The Classic Collection on Prayer* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2002), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 166.

- Kent Hughes: There is mighty power when the church comes together for focused, corporate prayer, because when the prayers are not perfunctory but thought through, and when the people are truly engaged and praying in concert, great grace is poured out on world mission, local evangelism, national leaders, the preaching of the Word, the sanctification of God's people, and the ill and grieving.<sup>7</sup>

### **Introducing a Biblical & Theological Basis for Corporate Prayer**

Main Point: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.

- What are reasons for churches straying from the practice of gathering to pray?
  - Many find it boring and unengaging
    - Short attention spans/lack of ability to focus/lack of spiritual maturity
  - Monotonous to listen to one person go on and on in prayer
  - Perceived improper stewardship of time
    - Busy activity = faithful ministry
  - Lack of or bad previous experiences
- Should these reasons deter churches from praying together or cause them to creatively brainstorm more exciting and attractive programming to engage members?
- Eckhard Schnabel: For church leaders and for the church as a whole, prayer is not a duty—it is a joyful privilege; it is not a chore that can be taken care of by one-liners between praise songs, but a passionate desire for the presence of God.<sup>8</sup>
- The first few weeks of sessions will focus on the first half of the book of Acts, which will serve as a biblical argument and model for corporate prayer.
- David Peterson: It is striking that at almost every important turning point in the narrative of God's redemptive action in Acts we find a mention of prayer.<sup>9</sup>
- In this biblical and theological examination, we will observe that as the early church was committed to uniting together in prayer, God displayed His working in and through them as He was gracious to:
  - Grant them His Spirit
  - Add new believers
  - Cultivate spiritual maturity
  - Raise up leaders and servants
  - Multiply the ministry

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor's Book*, 264.

<sup>8</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 89.

<sup>9</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 118.

## **God Grants His Spirit**

- Acts 1-2: the inception of the church's life
- Read Acts 1:1-14
- Summarize the scenes of Acts 1:1-14 – explanation and commentary
  - The order to wait for the “promise of the Father”
    - Darrell Bock on the purpose of this order: ...effective ministry requires God's direction and enablement...and the Spirit gives the enablement.<sup>10</sup>
    - Craig Keener: ...the disciples could not generate the Spirit or spiritual experience; ‘waiting’ for the ‘promise’ entailed faithful dependence on God.<sup>11</sup>
  - The promise of power and witness
    - When they received the promised Spirit, they would receive His power, which would enable them to carry out the role of witness.<sup>12</sup>
  - The ascension
    - Temptation to return home to Galilee
    - Obedience to the command to wait
  - Devotion to united prayer
    - The disciples were definitely witnesses of Jesus' life and ministry and could go and tell all about him, busying themselves with ministry work, but what was their choice, their need, in this moment?
      - To follow the command of Jesus.
      - To wait for the Spirit, the One whom would bring power and boldness
    - When there is so much “work” to be done in and through the church today, what choice lays before the congregation?
      - To get busy in our own power OR turn in dependence to the Lord
    - What was the focus of their prayer?
      - The context gives insight to the focus of their united prayers
      - Craig Keener: Jesus had taught about the kingdom (Acts 1:3) and the Spirit (1:4-5) earlier in this context, and these two themes occur again immediately afterward (1:6,8). Now the disciples are praying for precisely these promised blessings.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:676.

<sup>12</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: B & H, 1992), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:750.

- John Polhill: the emphasis of their corporate prayer was “undoubtedly for the promised Spirit and for the power to witness.”<sup>14</sup>
- What is the result of their praying together for the Spirit?
- Read Acts 2:1-4
- Summarize Acts 2:1-4 – explanation and commentary
  - God grants His Spirit
  - “Filled with the Holy Spirit”
    - John and Jesus spoke of this promise as a spiritual baptism, and Luke refers to it as a filling.
    - I. Howard Marshall on the numerous instances of the word “fill” throughout Acts: These references indicate that a person already filled with the Spirit can receive a fresh filling for a specific task, or a continuous filling...The basic act of receiving the Spirit can be described as being baptized or filled, but the verb “baptize” is not used for subsequent experiences.
    - Those in the church may already be baptized in the Spirit as a result of their individual initial conversions, but God longs to fill the church with more of His Spirit as His people pray with this focus.
      - We should pray for spiritual baptism for non-believers.
      - We should pray for spiritual filling for believers.
- Parallel with Jesus’ prayer life
  - Read Luke 3:21-22
  - Jesus prayed and the Spirit descended upon Him
  - Believers prayed and the Spirit descended upon them.
  - G. W. H. Lampe: this parallel illustrates Luke’s “repeated doctrine that the grand object of prayer is the gift of the Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Summary & Reflection**

- Mission of the church
  - What is the mission of the church?
  - In whose power will this be accomplished?
  - How did the early church pursue after access to this power?
- Biblical Observation: God works mightily in churches that do what together?
- God grants His Spirit – Acts 1-2
  - What did Jesus command in Acts 1?
  - What did Jesus promise in Acts 1?
  - What did Jesus’ followers do in Acts 1?
  - What did Jesus grant at the beginning of Acts 2?

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<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1951), 44.

- In whom does our church most often turn to for the power to effectively carry out Jesus' mission of making disciples?
  - Why is praying together so often neglected in the pursuit of this task?
  - How do you personally contribute to this neglect?
- What are you being challenged to do as a result of these truths found in Acts?

**Closing Prayer**





## Session 2

### God Adds New Believers | God Matures Believers

#### Opening Prayer

#### Recap of Week 1

- Mission of the church: Making disciples
- Biblical & theological basis for corporate prayer: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.
  - God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together.

#### God Adds New Believers

- Without looking at Acts 2:42-47, what are the practices of the early church mentioned in this well-known section of Scripture?
  - *If prayer is mentioned, highlight its notability.*
  - *If prayer is not mentioned, highlight its absence from our understanding of crucial church practices*
- Context of chapters 1 and 2
  - Saturation of content related to the Spirit
    - Chapter 1 – Christ’s followers awaiting the promised gift of the Spirit
    - Chapter 2 – coming of the Spirit and His initial working
      - gift of tongues
      - empowering Peter’s sermon and the addition of 3,000 souls
  - Did the Spirit’s working finish at this moment?
  - The Spirit continued even into the rhythm of the new community’s life
    - Craig Keener: Prayer proved to be not only a prelude to Pentecost (1:14) but a continuing part of the community’s life.<sup>16</sup>
- Read Acts 2:42-47
- Summarize Acts 2:42-47 – explanation and commentary
  - What are the key areas of church devotion highlighted in verse 42?
    - Apostolic teaching
    - Fellowship
    - The breaking of bread together
    - Prayer
  - This new community of faithful believers devoted themselves with persistence and perseverance to these practices, including prayer.

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<sup>16</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1:1011.

- Was this personal or corporate prayer?
  - What does the context communicate?
    - Direct context situates the prayer practice in the middle of a summary of communal church activities
    - 1:24 & 4:23-31 indicate that corporate prayers are certainly included in the life of the church
  - Corporate prayer was an essential activity of these early Christians
- What was the content of their corporate prayers?
  - Don't know explicitly, but do know that there is a connection between the church's united prayer life and God's work in granting new believers to their number
  - Luke connects the communal practices (of which corporate prayer is included) with their effective witness to those around them
    - Verse 47
    - Was this the lone answer of their effectiveness?
    - Who is orchestrating or causing the salvation of new souls every day?
      - Luke is clear that it is the Lord adding to their numbers!
- If God is the One bringing thousands to faith, what is essential for the church to participate in for kingdom effectiveness?
  - Corporate prayer is essential as it demonstrates understanding that God is the One ensuring effectiveness in pursuit of Jesus' mission.
  - The church displays a posture of dependence upon the One in control through prayer together.
  - Corporate prayer is only one of the stated practices Luke describes in this summary, but it is necessary!
- What is the result if the church is faithful in all the other areas of activity mentioned in this summary of the early church's community life except for prayer?
  - It will fail to exhibit dependence on the Lord, the One who ultimately can grant new believers on a regular basis.

### **God Matures Believers**

- Much is said in chapters 3 and 4 about the growth of the church numerically, but is that the only way a church grows? Growth in depth and maturity is essential as well.
- We are hopefully beginning to understand that prayer rests at the center of God's work in and through the church, and yet another brick in that wall is that God matures believers in churches that pray together.
- Context of chapter 3
  - Peter and John heal a lame beggar, which led to Peter's opportunity to testify to the source of the healing: Jesus Christ!
- Context of chapter 4
  - Peter's (and John's) preaching caused religious leaders to become angry, eventually arresting Peter and John.
  - Peter and John boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in the face of questioning.

- Leaders ultimately find no wrongs with which to convict them, but warned and threatened them. The threats of future persecution were present and real.
- Read Acts 4:23-31
- Summarize Acts 4:23-31 – explanation and commentary
  - With the threats of persecution bearing down on the church, what do they do?
    - When an obstacle arose, they didn't cower in fear, they didn't immediately seek after strategies that would be more appealing to the world around them. Instead, they banded together in prayer (lifted their voices together)!
  - Content of their corporate prayer
    - Absent:
      - Prayers for the judgment of those threatening them
      - Prayers for the removal of the persecution
    - Present:
      - Acknowledgement of God's sovereign power (quoting OT Scripture)
      - Petition for God to see them and recognize their situation
      - Petition to grant them "renewed confidence and power to go on speaking regardless of opposition"<sup>17</sup>
    - What can be the main focus of most of our corporate prayers together?
      - How does that differ from those of the early church here in Acts?
    - How should this challenge our approach to corporate prayer?
  - Why was there a need for praying for boldness for John and Peter after just displaying it in their interactions with religious leaders?
    - Level of persecution is only going to escalate
    - Peter and John needed a renewal of their courage
    - Those yet to face it needed strength and boldness when their time came
    - The Spirit indwelt them at this time, but they were in the midst of sanctification process (growth in following Jesus)
      - They needed maturity in obedience to the mission!
    - Their united prayer for this once again displayed their dependence on Him.
  - What was the effect of their prayer?
    - God shakes the place, filled them with His Spirit, and they continue to speak God's message with boldness.
    - The believers needed maturity in boldness to witness; therefore, they prayed, and God answered with urgency!
    - The effectiveness of their prayer did not cease at God's initial answer, but continued to be answered in chapter 5.

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<sup>17</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 252.

- In 5:12-16, many signs and wonders are accompanying the apostles' and church's proclamation of the message of Jesus, and Craig Keener observes that "the power of God invites more persecution."<sup>18</sup>
- Read Acts 5:17-42
- Summarize Acts 5:17-42 – explanation and commentary
  - In 4:29, the believers asked God to look upon their threats, to take note of what they were experiencing.
    - God answers their prayer by sending an angel to rescue them, demonstrating He is watching and knows what is happening
      - When God's people unite to pray together for His purposes to be lived out in and through their lives, God hears and faithfully answers.
  - Peter and the apostles end up before the high priests and officials with yet another opportunity to display their maturing in boldness granted by the Spirit.
    - 5:29 – "We must obey God rather than men."
    - God answered their prayer for boldness from chapter 4!
  - The leaders end up beating and threatening them again. What was their response?
    - They were filled with joy!
      - What does this demonstrate?
        - God not only matured them in witness, but holiness as well.
        - Rather than reacting with fear or anger, they were joyful.
    - Regarding their boldness and holiness, Darrell Bock suggests, "All of this fulfills the prayer of 4:24-31."<sup>19</sup>
- On whom did the early church's maturity in the faith depend?
  - How did they display they believe it resided in God's hands?
    - The church needed the Spirit to grow them, and corporate prayer resided at the heart of that need.

### **Summary & Reflection**

- We have stated thus far that God works mightily in and through churches that pray together. We have discovered that God grants His Spirit and adds new believers to churches that pray together. He also matures believers in churches that pray together.
  - Here are a few questions:
    - Would you describe our church as being filled with the Spirit?
      - Why or why not?
      - What can be done?
    - Would you say that our church is adding new believers on a regular basis?

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<sup>18</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2:1205.

<sup>19</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 253.

- Why or why not?
- What can be done?
- Would you describe our church as a body that is consistently maturing in boldness of witness and holiness?
  - Why or why not?
  - What can be done?

### **Corporate Prayer**

We want to use time during these sessions to not only learn the biblical foundations for corporate prayer, but also put it into practice.

- Guided prayer time
  - Take time to personally acknowledge God as the One on whom we are dependent and that our church would turn in dependence upon Him and Him alone.
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that God would fill this church with His Spirit.
  - Take time to personally ask God to grant opportunities to share the gospel message and bring new followers into the family of God.
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that God would add new believers to our faith family on a regular basis.
  - Take time to personally ask God to mature you in bold witness and holiness, just as He did the early church in Acts.
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that God would mature our church in the faith, molding and shaping us for His kingdom's work.

### **Closing Prayer**



### Session 3

#### God Directs Decision-Making | God Multiplies Ministry

#### Opening Prayer

#### Recap of Weeks 1-2

- Mission of the church: Making disciples
- Biblical & theological basis for corporate prayer: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.
  - God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together.
  - God adds new believers to churches that pray together.
  - God matures believers in churches that pray together.

#### God Directs Decision-Making

- How many of you have been part of a church for longer than 10 years?
  - During your time in church life, have any of you witnessed the church you were part of face a major problem?
  - During your time in church life, have any of you witnessed the church you were part of face a very important decision?
- Problems will arise. Important decisions will arise.
  - The question that looms: What pathway should God's people pursue for resolution of their problems and revelation about their decisions?
- The followers of Jesus in Acts clearly exemplify a foundational principle in answering this question: they pray and do so together!
  - Specific situations are found in chapters 1 and 6
  - As Luke recounts these situations, he points his readers to the truth that God directs the decision-making in churches that pray together.
- Read Acts 1:15-26
- Summarize Acts 1:15-26 – explanation and commentary
  - vv. 15-23
    - Peter is convinced an apostolic replacement is needed for Judas
    - The qualifications for the replacement are set before them
    - Two men are put forward for consideration
    - What is the temptation at this point?
      - Apostolic politics
        - Some would have had a greater relationship with Barsabbas
        - Some would have had a greater relationship with Matthias

- Persuasion toward a particular candidate as a result of this would have been man-centered
- vv. 24-25
  - With the names before them, what did they do?
    - David Peterson: Before casting lots, the disciples united in prayer for the Lord to reveal his will.<sup>20</sup>
  - What convictions did this act of joining together in prayer communicate?
    - Dependence on God
    - Belief in the sovereign hand of God – cf. the phrases they used
- v. 26
  - The apostles did cast lots
    - An old era practice sanctioned by God, which ended with this situation, never seen again in the NT
      - The Holy Spirit arrived in the next scene, denoting a new kind of relationship between God and His followers.
    - David Peterson: They casted lots with a “confidence that the Lord knew the hearts of the candidates and had already made His choice.”<sup>21</sup>
- Parallel between Jesus choosing of the twelve and the Lord’s choosing a replacement
  - Both grounded in the discipline of prayer
  - Jesus with a decision before Him – Luke 6:12ff
  - The apostles followed His pattern by turning to the Father in prayer at decision time
- Darrell Bock: Readers of Acts are to understand this unit not only as an explanation of how Judas was replaced but also as a precedent for how to seek God as a community in decisions, looking to God to show the way.<sup>22</sup>
- Read Acts 6:1-7
- Summarize Acts 6:1-7 – explanation and commentary
  - What was the major problem before the infant church?
  - What was the proposal? What did this proposal allow the apostles to do?
    - Note the importance of the apostolic leadership in both preaching and corporate prayer.
  - Qualifications before them, members of the church choose the men and set them before the apostles.
    - The apostles accept the nominations and proceed to pray for them and lay hands on them.

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<sup>20</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 90.

- The prayer here seems to follow the choosing
  - The explicit order of prayer and a following decision is not laid out as clearly in chapter 6 as it is in chapter 1, but the corporate prayer of God's people saturates this section.
    - 1<sup>st</sup>: the apostles appeal to their need to continue leading the church in united prayer
    - 2<sup>nd</sup>: the apostles “commissioned with prayer and the laying on of hands, which indicates a recognition of God's call for this task.”<sup>23</sup>
    - These demonstrate the church's dependence on God in the decision-making process of the seven being chosen and commissioned for service.
- When problems or decisions arose, where did the early church turn?
  - Corporate prayer
  - They didn't rely on personal wisdom, which would lead them astray

### **God Multiplies Ministry**

- To this point, the passages and topics covered have demonstrated the power of corporate prayer in the life and ministry of the local church's immediate context, but is that the entire scope of Jesus' mission? To what locations did Jesus promise the church would be a witness?
  - Does corporate prayer have an impact on the local church's ability to take the name of Jesus beyond where they can imagine and to the nations?
    - Acts 13-14 finds the church once again devoted to united prayer and as a result God multiplies its ministry.
- Read Acts 13:1-3
- Summarize Acts 13:1-3 – explanation and commentary
  - I. Howard Marshall: The importance of the present narrative is that it describes the first piece of planned ‘overseas mission’ carried out by representatives of a particular church, rather than by solitary individuals, and begun by a deliberate church decision, inspired by the Spirit, rather than somewhat more casually as a result of persecution.<sup>24</sup>
  - Quick Summary of both chapters
    - v. 1 – the church at Antioch identified
    - v. 2 – the church worshipping the Lord and fasting, during which time the Holy Spirit spoke and called Barnabas and Saul to a particular work.
    - v. 3 – the church fasts and prays, lays their hands on the men, and sent them out to the Lord's work for which He had called them.

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<sup>23</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 262.

<sup>24</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 227-28.



- Remainder of 13 & 14 – the two men are set apart and sent out as missionaries; they went to multiple locations away from home and boldly proclaimed the gospel in the face of much opposition and persecution; many disciples are made; Barnabas and Paul disciple the new believers in the faith and churches are established and elders appointed in every church.
  - The foundation for this amazing work: devotion to corporate prayer
  - v. 3 is explicit with its description including prayer
    - “Then after fasting and praying...”
  - v. 2 contains the often-overlooked corporate prayer of the church
    - The corporate prayers of v. 3 came after the Spirit spoke, but that of v. 2 precedes His speaking
    - Did the worship of the Antioch church in v. 2 include corporate prayer?
      - Would have included prayers as well as teaching and the breaking of bread (2:42)<sup>25</sup>
      - The activity of worship is coupled with fasting, so it is most likely a reference to prayer<sup>26</sup>
        - Fasting also associated with prayer in 14:23
      - Craig Keener: the “revelation concerning the mission of Saul and Barnabas came during prayer—indeed concerted prayer.”<sup>27</sup>
  - The church devoted themselves to praying together and the Lord gave vision and calling
    - The church further devoted themselves to dependence on the Lord’s working as they fasted and prayed again in v. 3.
- Read Acts 14:24-27
- Summarize Acts 14:24-27 – explanation and commentary
  - In v. 27, Paul and Barnabas gather the entire church together to report all that had happened, which is fitting since it was the entire church that had sent them out.
  - Connection between church’s corporate prayers (beginning of 13) and the glorious report (end of 14):
    - David Peterson: Reporting back was a way of encouraging those believers to see how God in his grace had been answering their prayers. Reviewing their experiences, Paul and Barnabas were able to see the hand of God in everything that had happened. In particular, what God had done through them was to bring many to faith, so that churches were planted and patterns of leadership established over a wide area.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 554.

<sup>26</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 375.

<sup>27</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2:1990.

<sup>28</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 416.

- The Antioch church's faithful devotion to corporate prayer led to God's faithful action of multiplying their ministry in ways not seen in the Acts narrative to that point. What laid at the foundation of it all? The corporate prayers of the church.

### **Summary & Reflection**

- When held up in comparison to the life of the early church in Acts, how would you describe the corporate prayer life of the modern church (our church)?
- What leads to the anemic status of prayer in our churches?
- The selected passages through these first three sessions have shown that united prayer by God's people preceded many of the mighty works of God throughout Acts.
  - The church prayed together for His Spirit – He granted their request.
  - The church faithfully prayed together – He added to their numbers daily.
  - The church unified in prayer for growth in holiness – He matured the bold witness.
  - The church approached God in prayer together as major decisions arose – He directed them.
  - The church prayed for Jesus' mission to be carried out – God multiplied the church.
- How will these things and more happen in and through our church today?

### **Corporate Prayer**

We want to use time during these sessions to not only learn the biblical foundations for corporate prayer, but also put it into practice.

- Guided prayer time
  - Allow anyone who desires to lift up a prayer for our church regarding our decision-making
    - That we would turn first and foremost to God in prayer
    - Any particular decision/problem that is currently before the church
  - Allow anyone who desires to lift up a prayer for the multiplication of the gospel beyond our walls
    - Asking the Lord to use us and our ministry and resources to expand and enhance His kingdom in our community and ultimately to the nations

### **Closing Prayer**



## Session 4

### Enriching Unity | Heightening God-Centeredness

#### **Recap of Weeks 1-3**

- Mission of the church: Making disciples
- Biblical & theological basis for corporate prayer: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.
  - God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together.
  - God adds new believers to churches that pray together.
  - God matures believers in churches that prayer together.
  - God directs decision-making in churches that pray together.
  - God multiplies the ministry of churches that pray together.

#### **Introducing the Disciple-Making Nature of Corporate Prayer**

Main Point: Corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life.

- In light of the biblical warrant from Acts covered in the first three sessions, the frequency and fervency with which the disciples engaged in united corporate prayer expresses at least two of their beliefs on the discipline:
  - 1<sup>st</sup> – they knew Jesus’ commission of making disciples would not be accomplished on their own power
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> – the disciples viewed corporate prayer as a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life
    - This may be implicit, but their prioritization of the activity expressed this belief clearly
    - This understanding and activity ultimately served their efforts toward fulfilling Jesus’ commission
    - John Franklin: The apostles knew the best discipleship strategy was to model prayer and create opportunities to pray.<sup>29</sup>
- Why did the disciples view prayer life together as necessary in the discipleship process?
  - Jesus prioritized corporate prayer as He disciplined them.
  - Prayer is not the only activity of making disciples, but Jesus’ actions emphasize it as a foundational element in the process.

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<sup>29</sup> John Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken: How to Lead a Powerful Prayer Meeting* (Nashville: B & H, 2005), 27.

- Megan Hill: In praying together we disciple one another: we strengthen one another's faith, testify to our experiences of God, shape one another's repentance and desires, stir one another to thanksgiving, and encourage one another in godly habits...Brothers and sisters, praying together is a school for the whole Christian life.<sup>30</sup>
- Over the course of these final three sessions, we will observe together how corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. We will highlight the various benefits of the spiritual discipline in the personal and corporate lives of believers. We will look at how corporate prayer impacts the local church's:
  - Unity
  - God-Centeredness
  - Missions and Evangelism
  - Community with One Another
  - Personal Holiness

## **Unity**

- What can be some sources or causes of division in a local church body?
  - Politics
  - Social stances
  - Economic differences
  - Ethnicity
  - Preferences in or for a particular ministry area
- What is the impact of such tension and detachment from one another?
  - Severely stunts both personal and corporate growth in the faith
- What solutions are offered to bring unity to the church (from internal/external counselors)?
- The Lord is clear: Devotion to corporate prayer develops and enriches unity among church members.
  - David Mathis: Praying together is one of the single most significant things we can do together to cultivate unity in the church.<sup>31</sup>
- Biblical unity does not equate uniformity
  - Culture of uniformity (may appear unified, but are surface level)...the same:
    - Socio-economic status
    - Cultural background
    - Ethnicity
    - Age range
    - Stage of life

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<sup>30</sup> Megan Hill, *Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in Our Homes, Communities, and Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 70.

<sup>31</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 114.

- Interests
  - Biblical unity (hinges on internal, not external)
    - Ultimately an explicit agreement<sup>32</sup> in belief, purpose, and cooperation.
    - A bond of grace<sup>33</sup> under the banner of Jesus Christ.
    - John Franklin: Five times in the first five chapters of Acts, Scripture records that the disciples were in “one accord.” In each instance the Greek word *homothumadon* is used. The word is a compound from *homos* meaning “same or together,” and *thumos* meaning “passion, anger, fierceness, wrath, indignation, heat, or glow.” Joining these concepts together, the word can be understood as the same burning of heart, or same heart passion.<sup>34</sup>
- Unity in the church matters to Jesus
  - John 17:20-23
    - Unique perspective into the prayer life of Jesus in His final earthly days
    - Reveals his heart for the current and future disciples/followers
    - Verses give His focus regarding His followers’ relations with one another
    - E. M. Bounds: The subject of their unity pressed upon Him. Note how He called His Father’s attention to it, and see how He pleaded for this unity of His followers...Notice how intently His heart was set on this unity.<sup>35</sup>
    - Why was Jesus so intent on their unity?
      - v. 21 & 23
      - The heart of Jesus’ plea to the Father for unity among His followers is grounded in His ultimate mission of making disciples!
      - God’s image bearers living in unity = rightly reflecting God
      - Division and strife = failure, weakness, shame, and woe<sup>36</sup>
  - Matthew 18:19-20
    - Jesus knew the power of the church’s prayer life depended on their unity

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Praying Together for True Revival*, ed. T. M. Moore (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 99.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1998), 380.

<sup>34</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 47-48.

<sup>35</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 356.

<sup>36</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 356.

- Context of these verses = church discipline, but a “prayer principle and prayer promise”<sup>37</sup> is given
  - Donald Whitney: There is, however, one word in this verse that makes it broad enough to encompass all corporate prayer. Notice that Jesus says in verse 19 that “if two of you agree on earth concerning *anything* that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven” (italics added). Thus we can take this promise and apply it to any united prayer not just prayer regarding church discipline.<sup>38</sup>
  - Mutual prayer (no power) is different from United prayer (power)
    - Mutual prayer – sitting in the same location with another and praying about the same thing<sup>39</sup>
    - United prayer – Jesus’ name is at the center and the bond of the union makes believers one<sup>40</sup>
- Effective corporate prayer both DEMANDS and PRODUCES unity among church members
  - Passage like Matt. 18 shows that effectiveness in corporate prayer demands unity
  - Also accurate to say simultaneously that true united corporate prayer produces unity among church members
- Corporate prayer produces unity
  - Jonathan Edwards: Union in religious duties, especially in the duty of prayer, in praying one with and for another, and jointly for their common welfare, above almost all other things, tends to promote mutual affection and endearment.<sup>41</sup>
  - Great Awakening of 1857-1858
    - Revival began as a result of daily prayer meetings in NYC and was notably participated in by people from various denominational backgrounds.
    - J. Edwin Orr: The Great Awakening of 1857-58 produced the highest degree of real cooperation and unity among the various evangelical Christian denominations until then known in modern times. The general “zeal for souls” blurred denominational lines and diminished the denominational ambitions for aggrandizement. Some previous awakenings had been divisive in effect but this one witnesses the denominational walls “crumble to the earth before the heaven-

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<sup>37</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 165.

<sup>38</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 166.

<sup>39</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 166.

<sup>40</sup> Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer*, 381.

<sup>41</sup> Edwards, *Praying Together for True Revival*, 102.

descended impulse.” The simple word “union” became the dominant description of the hundreds of prayer gatherings.<sup>42</sup>

- Result of these prayer gatherings? Unity and Jesus’ disciple-making mission flourishing nation-wide!
- Contradiction of corporate prayer demanding and producing unity?
  - Acts 1:14 – unity of the Spirit already present
  - Ephesians 4:3 – “eager to maintain” it
  - Corporate prayer is “not only a sign that unity exists among the brothers but also a catalyst for more.”<sup>43</sup>
- Which requires more energy and effort?
  - Succumbing to self-serving nature in the local body
  - Fighting for the posture of unity in the local church
- God’s directive for fighting well for unity is found in the pursuit of corporate prayer.
  - This discipline ushers in an interdependence that matures over time and creates a corporate bond unique to the body of Christ as well as a development and growth for each participating individual.

### **God-Centeredness**

- Closely tied to the fight for unity is the consistent struggle of combatting self-centeredness
- Apostle Paul
  - Romans 7:15
    - New desires in Christ, but selfish fleshly pursuits continue to tempt/tug
  - 1 Corinthians 5
    - Paul condemns the Corinthian church for their willful toleration of sexual immorality by one of their own church members. They knew about it and sought out selfish recognition through their boasting.
      - Selfishness led this church to arrogance in their sinful toleration
  - 1 Corinthians 11
    - Paul condemns the selfish actions of groups in the congregation related to the partiality shown in carrying out the Lord’s Supper.
  - Philippians 2
    - Paul knew that joy and fulfillment in Christ would be absent in the presence of self-centered living, so he pleaded with the Philippians – 2:3-4
- Do you wrestle with self-centeredness in your personal life? In what locations and ways?

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<sup>42</sup> J. Edwin Orr, *The Event of the Century: The 1857-1858 Awakening*, ed. Richard Owen Roberts (Wheaton, IL: International Awakening Press, 1989), 276.

<sup>43</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

- Does the local church wrestle with self-centeredness in its corporate life? In what ways?
- Antidote for self-centeredness = prayer
  - Devotion to corporate prayer heightens God-centeredness among church members
  - Chuck Lawless: Prayer is a relationship with this God, and praying churches focus on Him and on those He loves. A church simply can't focus on God through prayer and remain centered on themselves.<sup>44</sup>
  - As believers pray with one another, their hearts are reoriented vertically toward God and horizontally toward others.
- Satan's Deception
  - Selfishness dies a difficult death in the lives of believers...even a tool that God uses to change and mold us, prayer, can be hijacked by the Enemy
    - Satan "leads people toward arrogant and selfish praying."<sup>45</sup>
  - Corporate prayer has the potential and God-ordained intent to focus a congregation toward Him and His ways, but members can easily succumb to the temptation to "pray mostly for what we want to see happen in the church."<sup>46</sup>
  - How to combat self-centered prayer?
    - Be guided by His Word – this sets the tone with hearing from God first
    - Follow Jesus– Matthew 6:10 – "Your kingdom come, your will be done..."
- What is one of the most prominent ways churches can stray from praying together for God's agenda?
  - Many prayer gatherings in local churches become an organ recital, praying for "lungs, livers, kidneys, hearts."<sup>47</sup>
    - Leaves prayer meetings "tedious and unproductive"<sup>48</sup> when the list of health concerns grows so long that it dominates the entirety of the time.
  - Are health concerns worth praying for? Yes

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<sup>44</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Charles E. Lawless, *Eating the Elephant: Leading the Established Church to Growth*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Pinnacle, 2003), 89.

<sup>45</sup> Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors: Growing Healthy Churches That Are Equipped for Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 156.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization: Overcoming Eight Common Barriers to Church Renewal* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2018), 29.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 24.

<sup>48</sup> John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 100.



- Yet, Onwuchekwa counsels that leaders should “populate the prayer list primarily with kingdom, whole body, and major life concerns.”<sup>49</sup>
- The physical health of church members and their extended contacts is important and of concern to God, but not more important than spiritual matters the church should take to God for His action and power to resolve.
- Exclusively praying for health concerns, or having them dominate the prayer list, can sidetrack the people of God from focusing on Him and His mission.<sup>50</sup>
- One of the great battles of the Christian life: self-centeredness
  - One of God’s most prominent attacks against it: prayer gatherings that turn members’ affections, attention, and focus toward Him

### **Summary & Reflection**

- When you have had opportunities to pray together with or for other believers, how has it impacted your relationship with them?
  - It is difficult to continue to be at odds with someone that you are praying with or for
- What has been your experience with the content of most corporate prayer gatherings of the church? What is the most prominent topic/theme of prayer?
  - How can the church shift toward more focus of corporate prayer on Him and the mission and church-wide concerns? How can you be an agent for that change?

### **Corporate Prayer**

We want to use time during these sessions to not only learn the biblical foundations for corporate prayer, but also put it into practice.

- Guided prayer
  - Take time to ask the Lord to unify our church
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that the church would allow Jesus’ name to bond us together
  - Take time to ask the Lord to remove self-centeredness from your own heart
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that the church would be God-centered in its prayer

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<sup>49</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 25.





## Session 5

### Heart Reorientation to the Mission | Carrying Out One-Anothers

#### **Recap of Weeks 1-4**

- Mission of the church: Making disciples
- Biblical & theological basis for corporate prayer: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.
  - God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together.
  - God adds new believers to churches that pray together.
  - God matures believers in churches that prayer together.
  - God directs decision-making in churches that pray together.
  - God multiplies the ministry of churches that pray together.
- Disciple-making nature of corporate prayer: Corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life.
  - Devotion to corporate prayer develops and enriches unity among church members.
  - Devotion to corporate prayer heightens God-centeredness among church members.

#### **Heart Reorientation to the Mission**

- In the life of the church, which would you say is the most difficult for a church leader to have their congregation be actively involved in?
  - Serving a meal at the local shelter
  - Working as a greeter on Sunday
  - Overseeing the event registration table
  - Volunteering to drive senior adult to appointment
  - Being a helper in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade SS class
  - Consistently sharing the gospel with neighbors and co-workers
- The answer from church leaders would resoundingly be the final option...consistently having church members sharing the gospel with unbelievers.
- Even as the population increases, declining conversions and baptisms describe the current state of the church in North America (including our city). What is the solution to moving church members toward greater participation in Jesus' commission?
  - Is it beating the drum and promoting it more? "Maybe if the pastor just talks about it more, then it will happen."
    - John Franklin: Have you tried to lead someone to practice missions and evangelism who does not spend any time in the Word of God or regularly cry out to God with other believers? It's closely akin to

pulling teeth. What do you have to do to motivate that person? Everything you know to do, and even then it rarely works. But let me ask you another question. What do you have to do to involve a believer who is spending regular time devouring, applying, and obeying the Word of God, who is constantly on his knees with other dynamic believers, crying out to God and experiencing God move in response to his prayers? Far from beating him into action, you merely have to point out the opportunity.<sup>51</sup>

- Is the solution for more evangelism/missions from church members through greater training/equipping?
  - John Onwuchekwa: When it comes to training Christians for our corporate mission, we often assume people just need more training, more knowledge, more apologetics, more motivation, and a little bit more guilt. There's no shortage of evangelism programs, books on how to properly evangelize, or Facebook ads that guarantee church growth. Some of these efforts are helpful. However, I don't think the main obstacle to evangelism is competence, which means the best fix isn't just more training. To be sure, training is a part of the solution, but if you've come from a background like mine, then you've sat in churches with some pretty competent people but little evangelistic activity.<sup>52</sup>
- There has never been a time in history when the church has had as much ability to disseminate God's Word across the neighborhood, state, country, and globe the way it can be accomplished today through technology and marketing; yet the statistics continue to reveal diminishing action and results for the church. The answer?
  - Devotion to corporate prayer reorients church members' hearts toward missions and evangelism.
  - Donald Whitney: The Bible and testimony of church history say that, despite how outdated it may seem, the effectiveness of the gospel and of the church are inseparably related to the united prayers of God's people.<sup>53</sup>
- Jesus' mission is clear: Make Disciples...so what are the obstacles that stand in the way of members obediently living out this universal calling?
  - Fear & Apathy
- Fear

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<sup>51</sup> Franklin, *And the Place Was Shaken*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 108.

<sup>53</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 172-73.

- Timothy Beougher: Fear seems to be the greatest of all barriers to overcome in witnessing.<sup>54</sup>
- Feelings of fear can be the result of:
  - Feelings of inadequacy in not knowing enough to share<sup>55</sup>
  - Thinking “they will do more harm than good”<sup>56</sup>
  - Worrying about rejection<sup>57</sup>, not wanting relationships to grow tense because of sharing the hard truths of the gospel message.
- What is at the core of these fears?
  - Placing too much weight on one’s own ability to see another saved.
  - The witnessing barrier of fear fails to recognize the sovereignty of God in the process.
- Apathy
  - A failure to recognize God’s granting believers the privilege and responsibility in kingdom work
  - Two main reasons for a posture of apathy in the life of a believer:
    - Avoiding responsibility
      - Although God is sovereign in the process of salvation, He still gifts believers with the opportunity to serve as His ambassadors and servants in bringing new followers into His family
      - Believers can grow lazy and “wrongly believe evangelism somehow becomes inconsequential because God is in control.”<sup>58</sup>
    - Lacking compassion
      - Beougher: The single greatest reason we fail to witness is that we do not possess the compassion of Christ.<sup>59</sup>
      - A lack of compassion leads to a lack of burden or concern for the lost.
- What is the solution for overcoming fear and apathy?
  - A devotion to corporate prayer reorients church members’ hearts toward missions and evangelism.
  - At the root of the remedy for fear and anxiousness is gathering with others to pray for boldness.

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<sup>54</sup> Timothy K. Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing* (Charlotte, NC: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1993), 9.

<sup>55</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 110.

<sup>59</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 28.

- At the root of the remedy for apathy is gathering with others to pray for the lost.
  - Beougher: If we lack a burden for the lost, we should get on our knees and ask God to give it to us!<sup>60</sup>
- How exactly does corporate prayer resolve fear, anxiety, and apathy in evangelism?
  - Onwuchekwa: The antidote for carrying weight we were never meant to carry is to let someone else carry it for us. Many of our evangelistic efforts are driven solely by pragmatism and strategy, when lasting abiding fruit comes from prayer (see John 15:8, 16). Praying together removes the pressures for “success” and puts it back on God’s shoulders. When we pray, “Our Father in heaven,” we acknowledge God is sovereign and does what he pleases. When we pray for God to save someone, we admit that God alone has the power to do so. When we thank him for salvation, it’s because we know he saved us—we didn’t save ourselves. As we pray to God for salvation, we realize that God’s sovereignty diminishes only our anxiety and apathy, not our activity. Prayer, then, is the pump at the gas station that connects us to the fuel for faithful evangelism.<sup>61</sup>
- Models of involvement of corporate prayer moving believers toward the mission
  - Early church in Acts (cf. first three sessions)!
  - Apostle Paul
    - Rom 15:30-32 | 2 Cor 1:11 | Eph 6:18-20 | Col 4:3-4 | 2 Thess 3:1
    - Could have prayed alone, but knew greater power and fruitfulness would come when others joined him to pray<sup>62</sup>
- John Onwuchekwa: Praying together corporately as a church helps to reorient the hearts of fellow church members toward evangelism, replacing fear with boldness and apathy with compassion!<sup>63</sup>
- Corporate prayer not only has an impact on local missions/evangelism, but also globally! The local church’s corporate prayers contribute to reaching the nations in two ways:
  - The Lord grants missionaries to those requesting them
    - Luke 10:2: The harvest is plentifully, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.
    - God calls certain people and families to particular places to carry out His mission of making disciples of all nations, and that wonderful work starts with the corporate prayers of the local church.
  - The Lord brings fruitfulness to missionaries work on the field through prayer

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<sup>60</sup> Beougher, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*, 33.

<sup>61</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 112-13.

<sup>62</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

<sup>63</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 114.

- AND corporate prayers for global missionaries and their work impact the church members praying
  - Onwuchekwa: We should also constantly keep the needs of any supported workers from our body in the forefront, because we want the members of our church to know that they carry the burden of participating in God’s saving work through prayer.<sup>64</sup>
- E. M. Bounds argues that corporate prayer is the key for all missionary success:
  - The key of prayer is in the hands of the home churches. . . . Success will be won by saintly praying in the churches at home. The home church on her knees fasting and praying is the great base of spiritual supplies, the power of war, and the pledge of victory, in this terrible and final conflict. Financial resources are not the real power of war in this fight. Machinery in itself carries no power to break down heathen walls, open effective doors, and win heathen hearts to Christ. Prayer alone can do the deed. . . . The home church has done only a trivial thing when it has furnished the money to establish missions and support its missionaries. Money is important, but money without prayer is powerless in the face of the darkness, wretchedness, and sin in Christless lands. . . . Prayer can make even the poorest of missionary causes succeed, but much money without prayer is powerless on the foreign field.<sup>65</sup>
- Fear and apathy are realities as barriers to evangelism and missions for church members. Do you experience these in your own life? Have you ever heard or thought of corporate prayer as one of the main remedies for these?
- Have you ever considered that your prayer with others plays a vital role in the accomplishment of Jesus’ mission for disciples to be made to ends of the earth? Why or why not?

### **Carrying Out One-Anothers**

- Throughout the NT, there are specific commands that include the phrase “one-another”...what are some of the commands that come to mind for you when you hear this?
- J. D. Payne: The kingdom ethic that kingdom citizens are called to live requires not only a common commitment to God but also a common community or fellowship. Some have referred to this commitment to one another as a covenant. If anything can

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<sup>64</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 116.

<sup>65</sup> Bounds, *E M Bounds*, 180-81.

be said of the Jerusalem Church in the Book of Acts, it is clear that they had a commitment to one another.<sup>66</sup>

- Mark Dever: The duties and responsibilities church members have toward one another summarize the life of the new society that is the church.<sup>67</sup>
- Actively pursuing this unique relationship with duties and responsibilities and obeying these directives from the NT is part of the maturing process of discipleship
  - Devotion to corporate prayer contributes to church members' ability to carry out the one-another commands found in the NT.
- To live out this community life, believers must know one another...what is one of the best ways for them to know one another?
  - David Mathis: One of the best ways to get to know fellow believers is by praying together. It is in prayer, in the conscious presence of God, that we're most likely to let the veneer fall. You hear their hearts in prayer like nowhere else.<sup>68</sup>
- Love One Another
  - John 13 & 15
  - Rom 13:8: Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
  - Gal 5:13: ...through love serve one another
  - Megan Hill: In prayer together, we love one another.<sup>69</sup>
  - When praying together, church members begin to know one another and have eyes, ears, and hearts opened to way they can love fellow members.
- Rejoice | Weep | Bear Burdens
  - Rom 12:15: ...rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep
  - Gal 6:2: ...bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ
  - Corporate prayer is an engine for living out these beautiful commands.
    - Megan Hill: In prayer together, we join in the praises and laments and supplications of our neighbor, bearing his burden to the throne, lending him a hand to cast them on the Lord.<sup>70</sup>
  - What are some ways that you have experienced this in your own life?
- Encourage | Stir Up
  - 1 Thess 5:11: ...encourage one another and build one another up
  - Heb 10:24: ...consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.
  - Hearing faithful followers of Christ, united in the Spirit, pray with and for each other encourages, builds, and stirs the body in a supernatural way.

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<sup>66</sup> J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 46.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 41.

<sup>68</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 116.

<sup>69</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 66.



- What are some ways that you have experienced this in your own life?
- Most convincing argument!
  - Perhaps the most convincing argument that believers are to join together in corporate prayer is the explicit command of James 5:14-16: Pray for one another
  - Regardless of the various perspectives surrounding this passage regarding healing and anointing, the implication seems to be “that there are some answers to prayer we simply would not get without involving others in our praying.”<sup>71</sup>
  - Donald Whitney: Apparently there are some blessings God gives only to those who humble themselves to say that they need others in the church and their prayers. There may be some things you are praying for right now that you will not receive unless the church or a group within the church prays for you.<sup>72</sup>
- God longs to interweave hearts and lives together in a unique way and as churches devote themselves to corporate prayer, they contribute to church members’ ability to carry out the one-another commands of the NT.

### **Summary & Reflection**

- How would you describe our church’s heart/culture toward missions/evangelism?
  - Do we have a culture where it is normal to see people sharing testimony of their sharing the gospel in the previous week, requesting prayer for a person they are sharing with, numerous adults coming forward to profess Christ as a result of a church member sharing the gospel with them?
  - Do we have the ability in our own power to change that culture?
    - Who does?
  - How could we see the heart of this church reoriented toward Jesus’ mission?
- Describe your relationship with those that you have had the opportunity to pray extensively with.
  - How has prayer played a role in your living out the one-another commands of the NT?
  - How does the thought of corporate prayers role in cultivating deeper community life impact your perspective on church life/actions moving forward?

### **Corporate Prayer**

We want to use time during these sessions to not only learn the biblical foundations for corporate prayer, but also put it into practice.

- Guided prayer time
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<sup>71</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 173.

- Allow anyone who desires to lift up a prayer for our church regarding our missions/evangelism
  - That we would have hearts burning to tell other of Jesus
  - That we would have fear replaced with boldness
  - That we would have apathy replaced with compassion
  - That we would see missionaries raised up and sent all over the world
  - That our current missionary/church planting partners would remain faithful in their task and see a harvest beyond what they can imagine
- Allow anyone who desires to lift up a prayer for the community life of our church
  - Asking the Lord to lead us to carry out the one-anothers of the NT
    - That we would love one another
    - That we would bear one another's burdens
    - That we would rejoice and weep with those rejoicing and weeping
    - That we would encourage one another
    - That we would pray for one another

### **Closing Prayer**



## Session 6

### Developing & Enhancing Personal Prayer | Conclusion

#### **Recap of Weeks 1-5**

- Mission of the church: Making disciples
- Biblical & theological basis for corporate prayer: God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.
  - God grants His Spirit to churches that pray together.
  - God adds new believers to churches that pray together.
  - God matures believers in churches that pray together.
  - God directs decision-making in churches that pray together.
  - God multiplies the ministry of churches that pray together.
- Disciple-making nature of corporate prayer: Corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life.
  - Devotion to corporate prayer develops and enriches unity among church members.
  - Devotion to corporate prayer heightens God-centeredness among church members.
  - Devotion to corporate prayer reorients church members' hearts toward missions and evangelism.
  - Devotion to corporate prayer contributes to church members' ability to carry out the one-another commands found in the NT.

#### **Developing & Enhancing Personal Prayer**

- Think for a moment and then describe the status of the personal prayer lives of most of our church members.
  - Thriving? Stagnant? Deep? Surface-level? Daily? Sporadic? Non-existent? Boring? Relational? Seasoned? Lacking?
- Why did you describe the personal prayer culture of our church in this way? What indicators lead you to believe this?
  - Mark Clifton: Most of the people in our churches don't know how to pray for more than just a few minutes. We've grown accustomed limiting prayer to thanking God for the food and asking Him to protect us. We can't fathom praying for forty-five minutes. Most Christians won't do it.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Clifton and Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization*, 25.

- Why do you believe that this is the case for so many in our church?
  - Donald Whitney believes the reason is often a result of not feeling like praying due to boredom: “saying the same old things about the same old things.”<sup>74</sup>
- Regardless of the reason, the overwhelming truth is that believers need help to grow in their prayer lives.
  - Who bears the responsibility to disciple them in this area of the Christian life?
    - The church (the body of believers) they belong to
  - What would you suggest is one of the most valuable tools in this work of discipleship?
    - Gathering to pray with others serves as a valuable tool in this work!
- Devotion to corporate prayer disciplines church members, particularly developing and enhancing their personal prayer lives.
  - Megan Hill: ...it is not merely a school for prayer, but it certainly is a school for prayer.<sup>75</sup>
  - Why is corporate prayer a school for personal prayer?
    - R. Kent Hughes: prayer is more easily caught than taught<sup>76</sup>
    - Donald Whitney: We can learn to pray by praying with other people who can model true prayer for us.<sup>77</sup>
- Ways in which faithful prayer meetings teach believers in the school of prayer?
  - Megan Hill lists a few ways:
    - The habit of praying reverently, clearly, and biblically is often learned in the hearing of others.<sup>78</sup>
    - Praying together also fosters a habit of praying regularly, guarding against the sin of prayerlessness.<sup>79</sup>
  - The impact of discipling church members in prayer through our corporate prayer can be done by both the church leader (the one leading the gathering) and the fellow seasoned members participating. These more mature believers communicate both “what” and “how” things are said in prayer!
    - R. Kent Hughes mentions the leader’s great responsibility and opportunity:
      - Our public prayers in our corporate worship services have a massive impact on the prayer lives of God’s people, in that

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<sup>74</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 11.

<sup>75</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor’s Book*, 263.

<sup>77</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 93.

<sup>78</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 79.

<sup>79</sup> Hill, *Praying Together*, 79.

such prayers teach the church how to approach our transcendent but immanent God.<sup>80</sup>

- Corporate prayer gatherings not only allow those weak in prayer to learn from others, but they also allow those in need of growth to practice the discipline...a sort of training ground for believers!
  - As the less experienced pray, it is both good for their growth in the discipline and edifies their fellow church members.
  - Charles Spurgeon illustrates the dual-blessing:
    - Persuade all the brethren to pray aloud. If the younger and less-instructed members shrink from the privilege, tell them they are not to speak to man, but to God. Assure them that it does us all good to hear their groans and ineffectual attempts at utterance. For our own part, a few breakdowns come very sweetly home; and, awakening our sympathies, constrain us to aid the brother by our more earnest wrestlings. It gives a reality and life to the whole matter, to hear those trembling lips utter thanks for new life just received, and to hear that choking voice confessing the sin from which it has just escaped. The cries of the lambs must mingle with the bleating of the sheep or the flock will lack much of its natural music.<sup>81</sup>

### **Summary & Reflection**

- It is no secret that many Christians struggle with their personal prayer lives.
  - The act of church members gathering to pray plays a vital role in the discipleship process
  - David Mathis: Plain and simple, the best way to learn how to pray is pray with others who have had their prayers shaped by the Scriptures.<sup>82</sup>
- In what ways have you seen your own prayer life shaped by experiences of praying together with others?

### **Conclusion**

- Through the first three sessions, we laid a biblical foundation for corporate prayer, with the first half of the book of Acts demonstrating that God works mightily in and through churches that pray together.
  - As evidenced in the selected passages, united prayer by God's people preceded many of the mighty works of God.
    - The church prayed together for His Spirit – He granted their request

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<sup>80</sup> Hughes, *The Pastor's Book*, 62.

<sup>81</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Only a Prayer Meeting: Studies on Prayer Meetings and Prayer Meeting Addresses*, rev. ed. (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2010), 88.

<sup>82</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 115.

- The church faithfully prayed together – He added to their numbers daily
  - The church unified in prayer for growth and holiness – He matured their bold witness
  - The church approached God in prayer together as major decisions arose – He directed them
  - The church prayed for Jesus’ mission to be carried out – God multiplied the church
- How is it that God wills to act in these mighty ways again today in and through our church?
- Through the last three sessions, we discovered how corporate prayer is a vital means of discipleship and growth in the Christian life. The aim of prayer gatherings is both vertical, in our relationship with God, and horizontal, in our impact on one another.
  - Jesus prayed with His disciples as a means of discipling them.
  - These disciples then prayed with the church as a means of discipling them.
  - Discipleship can take place in various formats and arenas, but one that we must not miss is the opportunity presented through corporate prayer.
  - When corporate prayer gatherings happen, church members tangibly:
    - Enrich unity
    - Heighten God-centeredness
    - Reorient hearts toward missions and evangelism
    - Allow the one-another commands of the NT to be carried out
    - Develop and enhance personal prayer lives

### **Corporate Prayer**

We want to use time during these sessions to not only learn the biblical foundations for corporate prayer, but also put it into practice.

- Guided prayer
  - Take time to ask the Lord to enhance the personal prayer lives of our church members
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that the church would be full of believers committed to praying on a regular basis, deepening their personal relationship with the Father
  - Take time to ask the Lord to send a Spirit-filled revival of prayer through our people, that this church would long to commune together with God in prayer
  - Ask a volunteer to pray that the church would resolve to be radically committed to prayer that follows the model of the early church in Acts and seeks to disciple others through prayer times together

### **Survey**

- Re-introduction & overview of the survey tool.
- Present the Biblical Corporate Prayer Survey for the second time
- Provide instructions for taking the survey:
  - Directions for the answer scale

- Be as straightforward and accurate as possible on each answer, but do not dwell on a particular question for an extended period of time.
  - Please do not discuss questions/answers with others in order to maintain the integrity of the survey.
- Allow 10 minutes to complete the survey.
- Provide instructions and access to the survey to those not present but with plans to digitally observe the remainder of the sessions.
  - Do not complete the concluding survey until all sessions missed in person have been digitally observed.

## APPENDIX 5

### BIBLICAL CORPORATE PRAYER STRATEGIC PLAN

The following is the strategic plan developed for implementation at FBC to enhance corporate prayer, intending to elevate the frequency and substance of the spiritual discipline in the context of praying together. The plan provides areas of focus, specific action items to be carried out, the responsible individuals and/or groups to accomplish the tasks, and the timetable in which they are to be completed.





## **A Strategic Plan for Enhancing Corporate Prayer at First Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky**

**Vision Statement:** To establish a culture of corporate prayer in the congregation through elevating the frequency and biblical substance of prayer together in three common gathering opportunities: Sunday School Classes | Worship Gatherings | Dedicated Prayer Meetings

**Core Commitments:** Based on the model of the early church in the book of Acts, we hold to the following in the implementation and practice of corporate prayer.

**Biblical Beliefs:** When the church gathers to pray, we believe God:

- Grants His Spirit | *Acts 1:1-14 & 2:1-4*
- Adds new believers | *Acts 2:42-47*
- Matures believers | *Acts 4:23-27 & 5:17-42*
- Directs decision-making | *Acts 1:15-26 & 6:1-7*
- Multiplies ministry | *Acts 13 & 14*

**Biblical Pursuits:** When the church gathers to pray, we desire to:

- Enrich unity | *John 17:20-23 | Matt 18:19-20 | Eph 4:3 | Acts 1:14*
- Heighten God-centeredness | *Phil 2:3-4 | Matt 6:10*
- Reorient hearts to God's mission | *Matt 28:18-20 | Acts 1:8 | Luke 10:2*
- Carry out the one-another commands of the NT | *Gal 5:13 & 6:2 | Rom 12:15 | 1 Thess 5:11 | Heb 10:24 | Jas 5:14-16*
- Develop and enhance personal prayer lives | *Luke 11:1-4*

### **Sunday School Classes (Led by Minister of Discipleship)**

- Communicate with all Sunday School Leadership that a monthly prayer guide will be provided to help them facilitate biblical corporate prayer in their classes each session. (February '22)
- Develop age appropriate monthly prayer guides for all Sunday School classes, having a unique emphasis each week. (March '22)
  - These areas of prayer emphasis would focus primarily on spiritual and ministry matters, which would balance the usual request and prayer time of most classes dominated by physical matters.
  - The prayer guide would be developed for classes from all Sunday School departments, from preschool through senior adults, involving ministry leaders from each of the areas in the age appropriate adjustments that may be needed.
  - This development of guides would include planning the emphases for the remainder of the year in order to bring balance and variety to the guides.
- Encourage & equip Sunday School leaders to actively involve the entire class in corporate prayer, finding unique ways to facilitate participation, especially those hesitant to pray with or in front of others. (March '22)
- Distribute the initial monthly prayer guide to the Sunday School leadership prior to their first Sunday meeting of the month. (April '22)
- Review and evaluate the implementation and participation through intentional contacts with Sunday School leadership. (April & May '22)

## **Worship Gatherings (Led by Minister of Worship)**

- Gather with small team to plan out corporate prayer emphases for the Sunday morning worship service for each week of the remainder of the year, incorporating the following elements. (February '22)
  - Create a prayer list, which would include:
    - Specific needs/themes: persecuted church, Advent, sister associational churches, etc.
    - Biblical focus: confession, repentance, thanksgiving, etc.
    - Denominational emphases: world hunger, Lottie Moon, Annie Armstrong, sanctity of human life, etc.
    - Direct missionary partners and partner para-church ministries
    - Areas of ministry focus throughout the church's life and ministry
    - Allowing flexibility in the schedule for emphasis on particular tragedies or events impacting the church family
  - Utilize Scripture as a guide for the corporate prayer each week.
  - Coordinate a monthly testimony of answered prayers.
  - Incorporate a variety of methods for approaching the corporate prayer time.
    - Led by ministerial staff
    - Led by lay leaders
    - Praying with the leader
    - Guided by the leader during a time of reflection and prayer
- Implement the plans, designating a time of corporate prayer during the Sunday morning worship service with clear guidelines for the prayer leader. (March '22)
- Review and evaluate the implementation and participation through member interviews (previously determined survey questions by the team) conducted by the initial planning team. (April '22)
  - Reconvene post-interviews to share responses and make any needed adjustments discerned in the process to further enhance corporate prayer in Sunday morning worship services.

## **Dedicated Prayer Meetings (Led by Minister of Discipleship & Pastor)**

- Develop plans for monthly dedicated prayer meeting on Sunday evenings through planning sessions between the Minister of Discipleship and Pastor, incorporating the following elements. (February '22)
  - Establish a calendar rhythm within the congregation's schedule (ex. Second Sunday night of the month).
  - Determine format for including:
    - Music
    - Scripture reading
    - Testimony
    - Biblical message/teaching
    - Variety of methods for prayer
    - Inclusion of requests
    - Particular prayer emphases
  - Determine future meeting planning schedule, allowing for enough time to incorporate member participation, yet close enough to the meeting date to stay relevant in praying for particular items/topics.
- Communicate with the church the upcoming prayer meetings, briefly describing the proposed format and plan for the gatherings. (February '22)
- Implement the initial monthly prayer meeting, incorporating the previously determined format and plans. (March '22)
- Review and evaluate the implementation and participation through feedback provided to the Minister of Discipleship and Pastor from the other ministerial staff and participating members. (April '22)
  - Discuss and make any needed adjustments discerned in the process to further enhance the substance and impact of corporate prayer in these gatherings

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## ABSTRACT

### ENHANCING CORPORATE PRAYER AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN OWENSBORO, KENTUCKY

Wesley Scott Dunn, DMin  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022  
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This project helped members of First Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky, to understand, desire, and live out biblical corporate prayer. Chapter 1 sets the context of the project, ultimately giving the rationale for the need to enhance the corporate prayer life of the church. This chapter also includes the goals and methodological approaches toward achieving the stated purpose of the project. Chapter 2 argues that the book of Acts provides a foundation and model for the practice of prayer as a corporate spiritual discipline that cultivates a church in which God is pleased to work mightily in and through. Chapter 3 explains the invaluable role corporate prayer plays in the discipleship and growth of the individual Christian as they seek to carry out their privilege and responsibility as church members. Chapter 4 details the methodology used to implement and execute this project, emphasizing the equipping class as the prominent channel of influence. Chapter 5 presents a final analysis, evaluation, and reflection on the project and its effectiveness.



## VITA

Wesley Scott Dunn

### EDUCATION

BS, Brescia University, 2005

MDiv, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016

### ORGANIZATIONS

Discipleship Network of Kentucky

### MINISTERIAL

Minister of Recreation, First Baptist Church, Owensboro, Kentucky, 2008-2010

Minister of Discipleship, First Baptist Church, Owensboro, Kentucky, 2012-