

REVIVAL: GOD'S PART AND OURS

Kevin Jones



This last chapter of Colossians may at first seem to say little about revival. However, it highlights Paul's method in approaching church growth. Here, we clearly see 3 steps which lead to church growth: prayer, witness and team work.

PRAYER

The gospel and the power of prayer: 4:2-7,12. What is the purpose of prayer? Are we trying to persuade God to do what we ask? No! Prayer brings our lives in line with God's best will for us: 'Thy will be done' (Matthew 6:10). If we do not pray, there are things on earth that will not be accomplished as God intends them to be. Prayer is placing our will into agreement with the will of God. It was John Wesley who said 'God does nothing except in response to believing prayer.'

How should we pray? 'Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful' (4:2). There are several lessons here: We are to be consistent, watchful, specific, focused, earnest and thankful. To be watchful is to be alert to God, and alert to the needs around us. This includes personal needs, but extends to our family, church, and nation. 'I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness' (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Prayer is to be wide ranging in its scope, but specific in its requests. Paul asks for a specific need. A very bad prayer is the one commonly repeated from the book of prayer, 'we pray for all people everywhere according to their need.' A prayer should be specific enough to know when it has been answered.

Prayer is hard work. Epaphras was 'wrestling in prayer' that his church 'may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured' (4:12). Wrestling is also translated as 'striving' (ASV), 'labouring earnestly' (NAS), 'praying fervently' (KJV), and 'earnestly' (RSV). Prayer is hard work.

There are three keys to effective prayer:

1. We must pray in accordance with God's Word. God has given us many great and precious promises. We may bring those promises before his throne that they may be fulfilled. We must learn to pray the promises.
2. We need to come in faith. 'Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours' (Mark 11:24). This is not a blank cheque to believe the ridiculous and ask selfishly. It is the condition for praying God's promises.
3. We must be guided by the Holy Spirit. We do not know how to pray, but the Holy Spirit leads and intercedes through us. 'In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.' (Romans 8:26). This is fervency in prayer that is available to us all. Each time we come to pray we must actively seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As we pour out our prayer, he pours in his joy. We are to be 'watchful and thankful' (4:2). Thankfulness is a lost art in the church. It can transform our relationship with God and each other. Remember there are three possible answers to a prayer: 'yes', 'no' and 'wait'. Each can be God's will for our lives and we must be willing to accept his will.

WITNESS

The privilege of witnessing: 4:5-6. We need to remember that Paul is in prison and prays for an open door, but not the one we would expect. He asks God to 'open a door, for our message' (4:3). Even in prison, his concern is the spread of the gospel. We would not expect opportunities in prison, but Paul did. His first desire is sharing the good news of Jesus.

His prayers were answered; later he writes to the Philippians: 'Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ' (Philippians 1:12-13; see also Philippians 4:22).

If we don't find opportunities to witness, then either God has not opened the door, or we are not asking. We are not looking for the doors we open, but the doors God opens. Rick Warren describes God's opportunities as 'surfing the wave he sends.' Wesley was more proactive. People told him not to be so forceful in his witness, but to wait until someone asked. He found himself travelling in a carriage and so waited for the opportunity to arise. When it did not come after an hour, he decided to make the opportunity and share his faith anyway. If we are prayerful, there are always opportunities to share our faith with others.

Paul's method was to speak with clarity and kindness: 'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.' (4:5-6)

It is not God's job to spread the gospel, that is a task he has entrusted to his church. It is to be done prayerfully, wisely, kindly, tactfully and boldly. Our manner and our attitudes to people outside the church are very important. We must value people as God values them. They are not just people to witness to, but people who are deeply loved by God.

TEAM WORK

The presence of friends: 4:7-18. Paul closes by introducing us to his team (4:7-17). Paul did not work alone; he had a team sharing in God's mission and ministry. If we are to grow, it will be a team effort. Christianity is a team sport. Paul's team includes Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Luke and Demas. They all have a story.

Tychicus is highly commended as: 'a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord' (4:7). He carried this letter to Colosse. If he had failed there would be no book of Colossians. He also carried Paul's personal news and was accompanied by Onesimus (4:9).

Onesimus is the runaway slave mentioned in Philemon. He had sought to escape his Christian master in Rome, but he could not escape God. His name means 'useful' and Paul writes to Philemon saying the former 'useless' one may at last live up to his name. Paul valued Onesimus highly, but before

he could grow in Christ, he had to put right his relationship with Philemon and return not just as a slave, but as a brother (see Philemon 10-15).

Mark and Luke, the Gospel writers, are with Paul, and Luke is introduced as a Greek doctor (4:11,14). Greeks were educated and skilful physicians; they were the first to trace the circulation of the blood through the body. We find that Luke not only wrote the Gospel and Acts, but actually lived through the experiences he recorded. (Note the use of the word 'we' in Acts 16, Acts 20 and Acts 21:16 to the end.)

As for Mark, there is a strange sentence, about him. 'Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)' (4:10)

Mark's history is chequered. He was on the first missionary journey to Cyprus, but half way through returned to Jerusalem. When Barnabas sought to take him on the second journey, Paul and he strongly disagreed. It seems Barnabas was right, for Mark had a ministry after all. Paul tells the church to forgive, and welcome him. Obviously, his previous problems were known, but now he stood with Paul in Rome. In Paul's last letter he writes: 'Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry' (2Timothy 4:11). Mark is an example of someone who is slow to

grow, who needed encouragement, but became a great blessing to the church.

Paul worked with a team, each contributing their gifts. Paul's team were devoted to prayer and ready to make the most of every opportunity. Each was different, but they combined to make Paul's mission a success. If our churches are to grow it will take each one of us combining in prayer, open in witness and offering our abilities to make it happen. It will take one more thing and here Paul finishes. It will take God's grace: 'Grace be with you all' (4:18).

This series of studies is available in the MET publication, 'Colossians: Hope In Desperate Times'.

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