

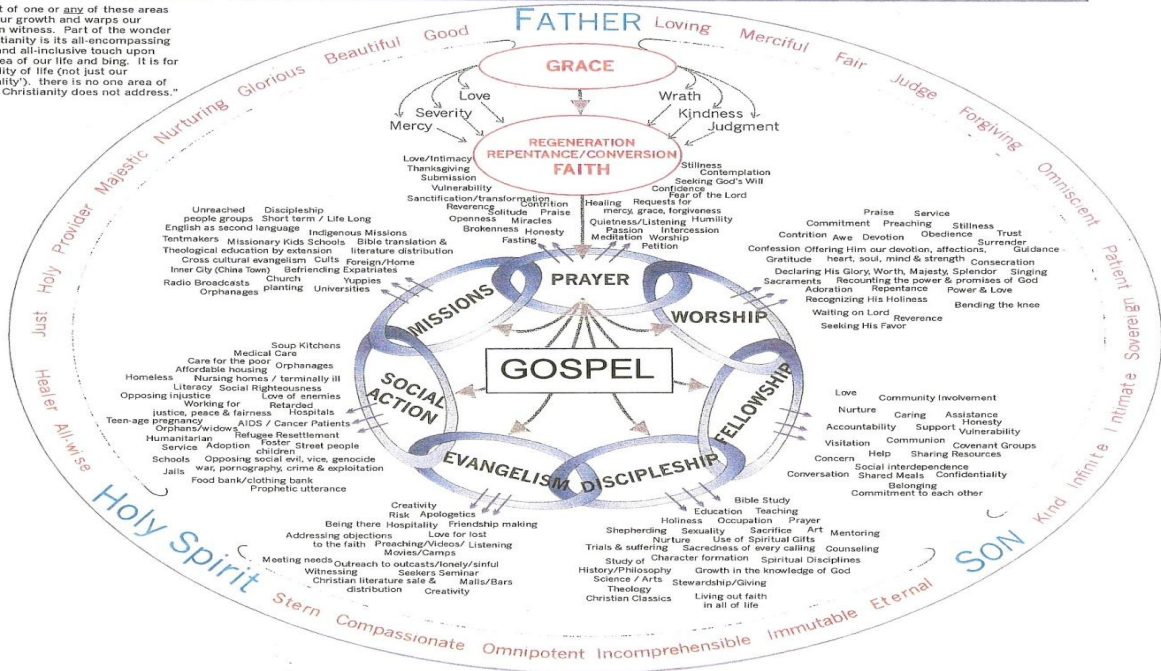
September 26, 2010

Psalm 5:1-3 / Acts 2:1-18 / Acts 12:1-19

Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#2) - The Prayer Saturated Church

THE SEVEN INDISPENSIBLE LINKS OF CHURCH HEALTH

"Neglect of one or any of these areas stunts our growth and warps our Christian witness. Part of the wonder of Christianity is its all-encompassing breath and all-inclusive touch upon every area of our life and being. It is for the totality of life (not just our 'spirituality'), there is no one area of life that Christianity does not address."



For those who may not have been here last week, I need to tell you that I started a series of messages on my vision for the church -- though I prefer to think it's simply God's vision for His church -- for we really have no right to embrace any vision for HIS church that is not HIS!

It's simple actually: It's a vision that states that what we as God's people need to do, is pursue and embrace and implement and strengthen in the church, ALL the many different things He has mandated or commanded us to do in His Word (which I have broken down into 7 different categories or links).

And to do them by stressing and pursuing and seeking to implement each one with equal earnestness and equal zeal, realizing that they're ALL equally important and equally necessary to the health and the well-being and the witness and the conversion-growth of the church that has been called and established and set apart for the purpose of bringing glory to God and bringing others to glory!

My grandfather (who was just a simple farmer in New England) would continually tell me, when I'd haul stuff around on the tractor with him:

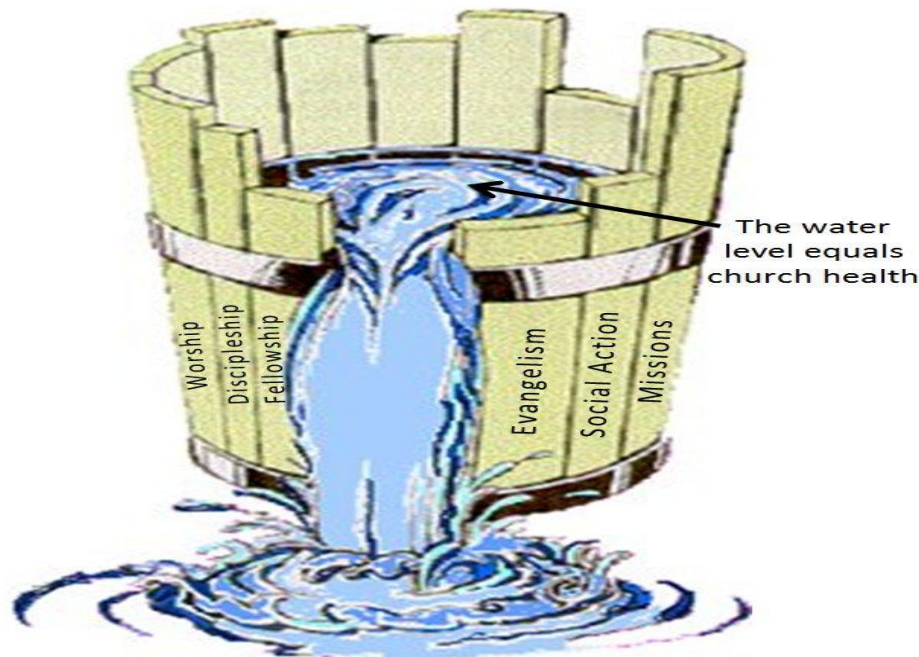
“A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”

And what he meant was that it does no good whatsoever to attach a chain of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch steel links to a tractor with a clothes hanger! Despite the size of the other links, the “chain” is only as strong as the clothes hanger!

And you say: *“Come on, Jeff, no one's foolish enough to do something as silly as that!”* Yet, I tell you that's precisely what many churches do in practice when they so focus on one particular mandate of God for His church (like preaching, fellowship or worship) that they totally neglect the other equally mandated aspects of ministry, like local outreach to the poor and forgotten or foreign missions or evangelism.

As I mentioned last week, God did not give them to us as a list from which we get to pick and choose the one's we like! They're not optional suggestions! He gave all of them to us as Scriptural mandates, because He wants every church to focus on every one! The greatest health coming when they all become equally strong.

Barrel with Staves



So, with that as a quick summary, what I'd like to do now is move on to address the **FIRST** link (in the Chain of Church Health) that needs to be made strong if the church is ever to be what God intended for it to be.

And I put prayer as the first link in the chain because the effectiveness of every other aspect of Christian ministry depends on it's being undergirded, empowered and sustained by prayer!

Calvin once stated: "***The principle fruit of grace is faith; and the principle fruit of faith is prayer.***" Or as Bunyan once put it, "***If you are not a praying person, you are not a Christian.***" Why? Because grace gives birth to faith and faith always gives birth to prayer -- to the heart crying out "Abba Father."

Without prayer saturating everything we do, our worship and ministry and fellowship and all those other things, become little more than mere human efforts or activities devoid of the power of God! Things that any Rotary or "local do-gooder's club" could do. Either that, or over time they become so ineffective (because they're no longer energized by God's supernatural power, laid hold of through prayer) that people simply get tired and give up because they see no lasting fruit from all their labors.

The saying, "***No Prayer, No Power,***" is absolutely right! People cannot expect to see the power of God if they don't pray. Any church can keep people busy "doing things" -- even good and necessary ministry things! But its only when those things are undergirded and energized and upheld and saturated with prayer, are they attended by the power of God!

Many people look at the early church (as it's described in the early chapters of the Book of Acts) and they ask: "What was its secret?" Or, "Where did its miraculous world-changing power come from?" Acts 1:14 tells us: "They all joined together CONSTANTLY in prayer."

J. B Phillips, in the preface to his translation of the book of Acts once wrote: "***It is impossible to spend several months in close study of this remarkable short book... without being profoundly stirred and, to be honest, disturbed... stirred, because here we are seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history... Here we are seeing the***

church in its first youth -- valiant and unspoiled -- a body of ordinary men and women joined in an unconquerable fellowship never before seen on earth. Yet we cannot help being disturbed as well as moved, for this is surely the Church as it was meant to be -- vigorous and flexible -- for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over-organization. These men did not 'make acts of faith,' they believed! They did not 'say their prayers,' they really prayed! They did not hold conferences on psycho-somatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they were uncomplicated and naive by modern standards, we have ruefully to admit they were open on the Godward side in a way that is almost unknown today. No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings."

And convicting as it may be, we need to ask: What do people think when they look at the Church today?" Are they convinced, by what they see happening in the church, that, "there is Someone at work there besides mere human beings." Something that can only be explained as the presence of the divine.

You see, our goal should NEVER be simply to be big, or get bigger. Our goal should be to be a fellowship where the presence of GOD can be found and the activity of GOD can be seen / and the grace of GOD can be experienced / and the love of GOD known through the Gospel is what motivates and compels us to make His Gospel and His glory known!

That's what you see in early church! You see a church where the Holy Spirit noticeably permeates everything they do! A church upon which God's presence came with such great displays of grace and power and divine love that people are filled with joy and excited about their faith and empowered by a source of strength and boldness and wisdom and healing grace that people know its origin is not of this world!

Take Peter's speech on Pentecost. Three thousand people are converted through one sermon! Why? Was it because Peter was a wonderful, naturally talented, seminary-trained preacher who studied the art of psychological persuasion and had immense abilities in the area of public speaking?

NO! It's because he's just been baptized with "the gift the Father promised"! It's because the convicting, convincing, miracle-working and regenerating power and presence of the Spirit of God was with him, and moving through him, and the crowd as well, as he spoke. The Spirit whose God-ordained task is to convince people of the truth concerning Jesus.

Peter, who as most scholars believe, was hidden away with the other 120 disciples for nearly a week and a half, constantly and incessantly praying and waiting (as Jesus had told them) for the gift His Father had promised -- the baptism of Holy Spirit!

And Pentecost was just the beginning! Because soon after the Spirit came, human selfishness (which is so deeply rooted in our nature) seems to all but disappear, as everyone voluntarily goes out, sells their land and possessions, and then pool the proceeds so it can be given to whoever had need (2:44-45).

It's unbelievable! In fact, it's so unnatural it has to be the work of God! There's no other explanation. Such love and sharing isn't human!

They worship together EVERY DAY (not just Sunday morning)! And they break bread in one another's homes "eating together with glad and sincere hearts" that were full of praise and gratitude to God, for the unspeakable grace He'd shown them by saving them and filling them of His Spirit.

Their lives, we are told, are so full of charity and love for others, that they "enjoy the favor of all the people," Christian and non-Christian alike. Even unbelieving observers, who saw what was going on, were taken back and secretly or openly stood in admiration of their lives.

And it didn't stop there. Soon the miracles of healing start happening (Acts 3:1-10). Miracles wrought by the Spirit of God as He moved to bring glory to the name of Jesus and convince others of the truth of the Gospel and reveal the awesome power that resides in the name of Jesus! (Acts 4:10)

And what's behind it all? **PRAYER! They pray CONSTANTLY before the Spirit comes / and then, once the Spirit does come (and the 3000 are**

converted) they "DEVOTE themselves," as Luke tells us, "to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to PRAYER."

From the moment they're converted, they are taught that prayer is one of life's top priorities! As soon as they come to Christ, the disciples and apostles teach them to be praying people! They DEVOTE themselves to it, and thus become a prayer saturated church!

And not just when they're with each other, behind the closed doors of a church or someone's home! That's the **SECOND**, thing we need to see. As Peter's out and around, he comes across a crippled beggar, laying on the sidewalk, outside the gate called "Beautiful" which led into the temple area. And he pauses right there on the street, or sidewalk, with others around, he prays for the man right there on the spot, and he's healed, and starts jumping around praising God!

And when news of the healing spreads among the masses, and Peter and John use it as a springboard to preach about Jesus and His resurrection, 2000 more people come to believe and join the ranks of the church! (4:4)

Yet, as a result, Peter and John end up getting arrested. They are interrogated and then released after being sent off with threats warning them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus.

And notice the first thing everyone does when Peter & John are released: THEY PRAY! They hear what happened and then they immediately pray for boldness to speak the Gospel even in the face of persecution! **"Lord,"** they say, **"consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."**

And as soon as they finish praying that prayer, Luke adds: "The place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

Or we could say, **"They were all filled with the Holy Spirit... AGAIN"** -- since they had already been filled with the Spirit initially on the Day of Pentecost.

They prayed individually in private, they prayed as a group, and they prayed in public, and God answered their prayers! Prayer saturated everything they did! It was prayers followed by answers, and then more prayers followed by more answers!

Which brings us to the **THIRD** point -- "Why do we pray? (In addition to what I've already said?) I know it's often assumed as a given that Christians should pray. But why? Why is prayer so imperative and essential and necessary and absolutely indispensable to everything that we in the church do?

And the answer? Because everything we're called to do in the church -- if we're doing it as it should be done -- demands that we be clothed with power from on high in order to be able to do it!

If we were simply called to grow churches larger by attracting new people with better services or more user-friendly facilities or being more techno-savvy or applying wiser niche-marketing techniques (what one professor of mine used to call "giving out ice cream cones" or things anyone can do simply by seeing what people want and supplying it) then I wouldn't need to pray and call down the supernatural power of God -- I'd simply go out and hire a church growth consultant!

That's one of the biggest reasons for prayerlessness. When you're only seeking to do things you can do perfectly well in your own strength and power, there's really no need to pray. For its only when we set out to do things that can' be done apart from the enabling power of God that we're driven by our own lack of power and ability to call upon the God who has all power and all authority and unlimited ability!

I don't pray for divine empowering to walk from my office to Nathan's, or to drive home each day, because (at least at this point in my life!) I can simply do them! I just stand up and walk or I get in my car and drive!

Yet its different with the things God calls the church to do! Imagine how it must have driven the disciples to their knees praying for the power and anointing of God when Jesus told them: ***"Go into all the world and make disciples of all***

nations, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." And there were only 120 of them living on the face of the earth!

It was a task so unbelievably immense that it couldn't possibly be done apart from the strength and power and resources and stamina and faith God would have to supply as they went to Him constantly in prayer -- especially since they knew all too well what the Bible says about the nature of the unregenerate and unconverted men and women Jesus was calling them to make into disciples!

The unregenerate, says the Bible, have "hearts of stone." Can you or I, with our words or logical argumentation, pierce rock? Do you or I possess the power to change a heart of stone into a heart of flesh? Do we have the ability to take someone who hates God and make them love God? No! If I want to see it happen, I'm driven to plead for God to do it. For only He can!

Likewise, the Bible tells us that people outside of Christ are ***"dead in their trespasses and sins."***

Do I (in my flesh) possess the power to give life to people who are spiritually dead?

Can I reason a person into the kingdom of God?

Can I convert a proud, sin-hardened soul and make it joyfully and willingly submissive to God?

Can I breathe the Holy Spirit into a lifeless soul or force a wayward and rebellious person to believe and place their trust in Jesus?

I wish I could! It would make my job so much easier! But I can't! I CAN solicit "decisions," and encourage people to believe and pray, but I CAN'T regenerate a soul! Because that takes a divine and supernatural act of sovereign grace -- which I as a mere human simply don't possess.

I possess neither the power, nor the ability (in my flesh) to do those things! And the same is true of you. Which means if we're ever to see it happen, we need to storm the gates of heaven and plead for God to intervene with His powerful, and life-changing grace which alone can save lost sinners.

As Spurgeon once said: ***“We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were a mysterious power going with it—the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. Oh people! We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the word, to give it power to convert the soul.”***

So LISTEN (this is key!): ***Only when I KNOW I do NOT have what it takes / Only when I know I LACK abilities and resources IN AND OF MYSELF / or am powerless IN MY FLESH to do what God explicitly calls me to do -- Only then do I cling to God in constant, earnest, ceaseless, fervent prayer, pleading for HIM to do what I could never do myself!***

God OFTEN asks us to do things we ourselves, by ourselves, cannot possibly do -- because that drives us to HIM! That's when we pray! When we KNOW we're inadequate for the tasks He's not only called us to do but expects us to do!

Which brings us to the LAST thing I need to share. If we are ever to pray as we should, saturating everything in prayer, we must fight the strong voice of pride and humble ourselves before God.

As the well-known verse says: ***“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”***

That's God's promise, my friends! Yet we haven't seen it fulfilled. Why? I believe it's because it asks all of us to do something that is very hard for proud, ego-centric, sinners to do -- It asks us to humble ourselves.

In fact, if we don't humble ourselves, we can't pray! Because true prayer is, by its very nature, a self-humbling act! We must humble ourselves when we kneel before God to pray / and humble ourselves the entire time we are in His presence praying for what we need or lack / and humble ourselves as we rise from prayer and must wait on Him to answer!

Prayer is, inescapably, a declaration of personal LACK. A public admission of our dependence upon God. A visible expression of the fact that we don't have what it takes. That we need from God, because we lack in ourselves, whatever it is we are praying for -- be it courage or strength or wisdom or boldness or understanding or love or patience or moral fortitude or food or wellness or health or healing! You name it!

My going to God is a humbled confession of my own inadequacy! An admission of my own personal weakness. An acknowledgment of my utter need for God and total reliance or dependence up on Him. That I do, as my friends used to say, need a crutch.

That's why you'll NEVER hear of proud, self-sufficient people, who "think they have it all together" (spiritually or otherwise), making prayer a priority in their life. Their pride won't let them, because they KNOW that prayer requires a humble heart / that willingly admits its own lack and need / and thus casts itself upon the grace of God for what they admit they don't have, can't supply and could never do!

"Prayer," said the beloved Norwegian devotional writer, Ole Hallesby, ***"is for the helpless.... Only he who is helpless can truly pray. Prayer and helplessness are inseparable."***

So what's my closing admonition?

- 1.) PRAY! Saturate everything in prayer.
- 2.) Only when we do will we see the power and presence of God permeate all that we do.
- 3.) We will never be prayer saturated people until we are humbled to see our own lack and inability and desperate need for God and His grace at all times - and especially in regard to things pertaining to His kingdom's advance.