

The Right Approach to the Prayer Meeting

Malcolm H. Watts

THE heart of genuine Christianity is habitual dependence upon God, and the value of the Church Prayer Meeting needs to be impressed upon us continually. If the Church is to gain spiritual strength and maintain its testimony to the power of godliness, it needs to seek God both in His Word, where He reveals Himself; and at the Throne, where He dispenses His favours. Our daily prayer should be that boldness of spirit and intensity of petition may continue among us at this Meeting and that it may be much increased in future days.

The records of Church History encourage us to pursue further this whole subject of Prayer Meetings. Preceding the great 18th century revival in Scotland there was a significant increase in the number of 'Societies for Prayer' and it has been suggested, not without evidence supporting, that those attending these gatherings 'did much to warm the spiritual atmosphere of the land'. The Ulster Revival of 1859 beginning, as it did, in the Prayer Meeting, is another spiritual awakening of great interest to the praying Christian in these days. What Prayer Meetings they must have been! 'The difficulty used to be to get people into Church', wrote a Minister in that period, 'but the difficulty now is to get them out'. William Harding, writing some little while after the great events of those days, attempted a description of some of those Revival scenes. Apparently the benediction would be pronounced several times, but on each occasion the irrepressible petitions of the praying people would break out again in true spiritual fervour; and, as this continued, the blessing of God fell from heaven. In Wales at the turn of the century the Prayer Meeting had a vital

part to play in Revival-work. Evan John Roberts, one of the leaders in that spiritual movement, attributed his calling and empowering to one such meeting and afterwards wrote: 'When a few more had prayed, I felt a living power pervading my bosom... This living power became stronger... I felt ablaze with a desire to go through the length and breadth of Wales to tell of the Saviour'. In conclusion it may be said that the Prayer Meeting has been singularly owned of God in the past as the means of reviving Grace. It could be so again.

As it is such an important time, there should be much preparation of soul and the Word of God is able to afford us guidance in these matters:

1. The necessity of attendance must first be established, as not a few feel a strange backwardness in approaching the place where prayer is made. The words of the Apostle, 'praying always with all prayer' (Eph 6:18), bear the meaning of exercising oneself in 'all manner of prayer'. This must include public praying. The command should suffice, but the wisdom of God in issuing such a command should not be overlooked. He knows that by nature we have no sense of spiritual need and no disposition to pray: that being so, He has supplied a real need in providing us with times and seasons for prayer, for without such appointments with God, poverty of spirit would evidence itself very quickly. Certainly, the leaders of the Early Church rejoiced at such a provision and they did not fail to keep 'the hour of prayer' (Acts 3:1). God knows, that following the Lord's Day, the world can strengthen its grip upon the heart and turn it away from divine and eternal things, setting us at a distance from His presence.

The Bible makes it very clear that the Prayer Meeting is of inestimable value in respect to this problem (1 Cor 11:2-17). Note: The Corinthian Christians are commended for keeping the Truth and abiding in the Way of God (v.2) and then the Apostle proceeds to mention the means whereby this has been made possible - the Prayer Meeting (vv. 3-17).

2. The comforts which accompany and follow united Prayers are unspeakably precious and therefore it would be sad if such an occasion was kept in a legalistic manner. Held out to us in Bible promises is a boundless fullness of blessings for all who "The heart of genuine Christianity is habitual dependence on God" assemble for purposes of prayer: a fact which needs to be kept in view, as our aversion to close and frequent dealings with God is due often to unbelief. The expectation of receiving according to His Word is not in us; the holy optimism of faith seeking the hitherto unknown experience is lacking and bright spiritual prospects are sadly absent. Do we really believe that Christ is with His people as they pray (Mt 18:20)? Do we really believe that strength is brought to us through a praying company (James 5:14)? Do we really believe that it is impossible for true prayer to fail, when offered up by the Church of the living God (Is 45:19)? The Lord taught us to pray together, when He said: 'After this manner, therefore, pray ye: Our...', but He taught us to expect divine answers and favours, when He added: '... Father'.

3. Upon entering such a Meeting a sense of the greatness of God should be sought as He 'will be sanctified in them that come nigh Him, and before all the people He will be glorified' (Lev 10:3) and, therefore, the spiritual preparation mentioned in an earlier letter should take place. Yet the praying soul must engage in an additional work: namely, the careful preparation of thoughts before they are expressed (Job 37:19; Hosea 14:2; Luke 15:18, 19). Neglect here could mean a careless coming into the presence of God through which God could be

offended, or an uncertain appeal which God will not regard, or even a request for something contrary to His perfect Will. Ill-chosen words, and many of them, might weary God to the point of withdrawal causing a time of spiritual darkness to ensue (Is 1:13-15). We are to remember Christ's solemn warning about 'the idle word' and His warning is only heeded when our lips speak the language of our hearts. Thus, to be still and to quietly wait before Him, in order that our words may be weighed in the balances of spiritual judgement, is both right and necessary. It was a wise man who wrote: 'He that refraineth (or "controlleth") his lips is wise' (Prov 10:19).

4. The danger meeting us at this point will be the temptation to think that the wording of prayer is of paramount importance. That temptation must be resisted. The structure of a prayer is not so vital as the spirit of the prayer. Ambrose Serle, an esteemed friend of A.M. Toplady, wrote a few of his reflections on public prayer and so rightly observed that: 'It never was indeed the form, or the want of it, that made true prayer, but the Grace of God in Christ Jesus, flowing through the words that were used, from or to the heart'. Do we not need to pray that the Spirit of God will gently lead us out into the heavenly realm and then to suggest the entreaties acceptable and pleasing to God? Indeed, and particularly as in human weakness there are many hindrances to the soul when engaged in this work, such as weariness, carnal passion and hypocrisy (e.g. Is 38:14; Jonah 4:1-4; Mt 15:8). Only the Spirit of God is able to prompt and preserve in such a time.

Whene'er to call the Saviour mine,
With ardent wish my heart aspires;
Can it be less than power divine,
Which animates these strong desires?

5. Now is the time for those spiritual powers within you to be called into active exercise and for prayers to be offered up to God in the presence of the whole congregation. The one leading in prayer is able, not only to glorify God, but also to edify

the gathered Church by making a contribution to the increase of devotion. The women present may join in this ministry (1 Cor 11:5; 1 Tim 2:8, 9 - 'I will therefore the men to pray in every place, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and disputing, in like manner women in clothing seemly'.R.V.), but I cannot escape the fact that God calls upon the men present to take the lead in this time (Rom 15:30; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1). It is a lamentable fact that often in our Meetings the men present refrain from opening their lips. It is impossible to justify this from the Scriptures. The brethren have special responsibility here and I hope the comment above will move the Christian men in regular attendance at such meetings to put this matter right amongst us. Of course, it is impossible for all to pray aloud and, if opportunity does not present itself, those of us being led in prayer should pray, as Hannah did, when 'she spake in her heart' (1 Sam 1:10,13). So all shall plead in prayer together.

6. The prayer and the praise rising to the Throne of God should ever be for the choicest of His blessings (Col 1:9-13) and in the simplest language of the soul. Prayer fails when deeply spiritual utterances give way to heavy theological arguments; when the beseeching of the saint degenerates into the preaching of the scholar; when reality is sacrificed in the interests of verbosity (Ecc 5:3). The best prayers are those manifesting zeal, constancy and spiritual-mindedness (James 5:16). How then may all this be secured? In only one way. Although we may be blessed with graces and experiences, in all

our dealings with God we must be 'sinners' knowing broken and contrite hearts. If we lay ourselves low before heaven, we shall find God there and be permitted to draw most wonderfully near. The great deficiency in the religion of the modern times is the failure to recognise sinnership before the God of holiness and consequently there is in our praying an omission of those sentiments expressed long ago by the prophet of Israel: 'We have sinned against Thee. To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness' (Dan 9:9).

7. When the prayers have been offered and friends begin to part, should there be needed some encouragement to continue in 'fellowship' and in 'prayers', remember that where prayer is neglected, the experience and knowledge of God is not to be found (Ps 14:4), but where prayer is offered to God acquaintance is made with God (Job 22:21). Do we not long for an intimate and abiding friendship with God? Is not our desire for a deep understanding of Him? Are we not yearning to prove that our God is real? In His Grace the Lord offers us the help of the people of God, that we might increase in the knowledge of Him. If it should be true that the Lord loveth the gates of Zion and that the Lord of Hosts is with us, then let us seek God together in the appointed time. Our souls have need of such remembrancers until, face to face, we know even as also we are known. There, in eternity, we shall know that time spent thus in prayer is not time lost, but time redeemed.