

How Our Small Group Prays

“Wow! I’ve never prayed like that before.” I said to myself after my first prayer meeting with the International Baptist Church (IBC) in Sofia, Bulgaria. In 1994, I was working with the Bulgarian Baptist Union and the IBC of Sofia, Bulgaria. The Wednesday night prayer meeting was unlike anything I had ever known before. Between 10 and 35 people from more than half a dozen nations would meet together and pray around a table for several hours. Since that time, I have developed my prayer experiences from Bulgaria into a model that I use with smaller groups. Our times of prayer are wonderful moments spent in God’s presence and in the fellowship of kindred hearts.

When we gather for prayer, each person is expected to bring a Bible, a prayer journal and a pen or pencil. Kleenex is optional, but highly recommended. We pray in rounds. During the rounds of prayer, we open a time for the participants to vocalize their prayer requests and concerns before the group. Each person writes down every request. After all the prayer concerns have been recorded, group members pick an appropriate number of items from the list until all the concerns have been chosen. Each person prays in turn for the requests they have picked from the list. Everyone else prays silently and agrees in prayer with the person praying. The person leading the group in guided prayer must determine how many rounds to go. The duration of the prayer meeting is not predetermined. It is imperative that the group stays open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine the duration of the prayer meeting. Over the years, I learned that focusing on a watch prevents me from focusing on God during times of prayer.

We begin our prayer time with a short time of confession. Our confession time is private time; we pray silently, confessing our sins to God. As a rule, we write absolutely nothing in our prayer journals until after confession time is over. Why do we begin with confession? In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus taught,

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (NASB)

We know that Christians do not physically bring animals to the altar for sacrifice today. But, if one looks at the Old Testament sacrificial system, God required sacrifices for many of the concerns that appear in our prayers today. The Old Testament sacrifices were not only for atonement of sins, but also for praise and thanksgiving. Therefore, if it were necessary to reconcile before making an offering in Jesus’ day, we believe it is necessary to reconcile before going to God in prayer today. God desired a right heart in His worshippers then, and He expects the same today. If any member of our group is not willing to reconcile with another person in the room, the door is open for them to leave. This is the only way that the group will be able to pray effectively in communion and harmony. We encourage each other to reconcile with people outside our group too. This will completely open their lives to God’s work.

Another verse of Scripture that weighs heavily upon our thinking about, and practice of, confession is found in Psalm 66:18. The Psalmist writes,

If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. (NASB)

In no uncertain terms, the Psalmist tells us we must not regard, or accept, sin in our lives. We all know that we sin. What the Psalmist means is that we agree with God that our sin is sin. Sin is something that we strive to avoid. If we sin, we confess that we sinned. We repent of that sin. We are in agreement with God about sin. When we confess our sins, God will hear our prayers. However, if we sin and think nothing of it, God will not hear us. If we live as though sin is trivial and acceptable in our life, we are in fundamental disagreement with God and He will not hear us. To live with sin in our lives is to forfeit the power of the Holy Spirit in our life. Therefore, our small group begins with confession to be certain that our hearts are right with God. We come face-to-face with who we are and who God wants us to be.

After confession time, we move on to a time of adoration. This is when we get our prayer journals out. Among other Scripture passages, we base our time of adoration on I Chronicles 16:28-29. The Chronicler writes,

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; Bring an offering, and come before Him; Worship the Lord in holy array. (NASB)

We go around the circle and share an attribute or characteristic of God that He has placed on our hearts especially for this time. It may be a way in which God has made Himself known in our life during the week. We write during this time because we believe that we can come to know more about God as we hear the testimony of others about Him. We also churn up within each other the desire to know more about God and to know Him in ways we may not yet know Him. It is definitely a worshipful time. We all understand that if writing gets in the way of worship, we stop writing. If we honestly confessed our sins before God, we come before Him in holy array. This is always an encouraging time that draws us to focus on God; it brings us face-to-face with who God is.

Many passages of Scripture implore us to give thanks to God. Our third round is a round of thanksgiving. One passage of Scripture that God really impressed upon us is Jeremiah 33:11,

...The voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who say, 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting' and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the Lord. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first, says the Lord. (NASB)

The thing that struck us as very profound when we prayed this passage was that the thanksgiving is not for something specific that God gave the people. The thanksgiving here is about God: the people are thankful that God is good and that His lovingkindness is everlasting. This is thanksgiving that has its basis in adoration of God – His character and attributes. In addition to this, the passage is so full of joy that it made us stop and examine our own lives. We found that we do not express joy as this passage expresses it. This kind of joy did not flow through us. Had we lost sight of the very things for which Jeremiah declared we should give thanks? We began to reflect on God's goodness and His lovingkindness. We prayed, thanking God for these truths about Him, but we also began asking God to restore our joy. The text from Jeremiah is about the celebration that resulted from the Israelites return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. How much more joyful should the Christian be

when he or she receives liberation from the slavery of his or her own sin nature! We should never be without joy. And, we should never be without thanksgiving.

After confession, adoration, and thanksgiving, we move into rounds of prayer based on specific passages of Scripture. The group leader brings a variety of prayer passages from the Bible. We pray about everything we can find people in Scripture praying about. As the group prays, the group leader relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring to mind what Scripture, and therefore what need, the group will pray for next. A couple of examples of our rounds of prayer follow.

One night we felt led to pray for our community. The Lord laid a verse from Jeremiah on our hearts. Jeremiah 29:7 says,

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare. (NASB)

It is obvious that many Christians today are not in exile. As we began to contemplate this verse and meditate upon it, God reminded us that Christians are in hostile territory in this world. We began to think about issues and troubles in our city. Drugs, alcohol and abuse. Conflicts between officials in our community. The incredible tasks faced by the teachers in our schools as they work to shape the future of our nation. The whole onslaught of items for which to pray was almost overwhelming. So many things in our city needed prayer. But, praying individually had not led any of us to realize the magnitude of the needs. God convicted us of the need to pray intensely for the welfare of our community.

Once, a couple in our group was not able to meet with us for several weeks. The man's mother was ill and in the hospital. We obviously wanted to pray for the family. As the rest of our group met, the Holy Spirit laid 3 John 2 on our hearts.

Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. (NASB)

We realized the need to pray, not only for the physical needs but for also the spiritual needs of this family. We prayed that the family would know God's presence and peace during this time. The man's mother passed away, but the family had nearly two weeks of close personal time together in the hospital before she passed. In fact, the family grew closer during that time than they had been for some time. God provided the family time to know that all was well with every member of the family. The spiritual healing that took place ensured that no one in the family had regrets of words left unspoken. In addition to the spiritual healing, the couple returned to our group with testimonies of God's work through and around them in the hospital. They were able to pray for and with a number of other people in the hospital who were going through difficult times with medical issues. They were able to share Jesus with people who did not know him. Our prayers for their spiritual well being were as important as our prayer for their physical medical needs.

Our closing round is simple, but vital. We look at passages of Scripture like Ephesians 6:19-20 where Paul asks a church to pray that he would be a bold witness.

...and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (NASB)

We pray that each member of the group will be a bold witness during the coming week. We also chose one person specifically to pray for every day for the coming week. In closing our prayer time with a prayer for boldness in witnessing, we will leave focused on our task to be about the discipling of all peoples. We cannot draw closer to God and neglect telling others about His plan of salvation.

After around two hours of intense, yet joyous, group prayer, we regret that we have to depart. Our time shared together in prayer is such a sweet and precious time in God's presence. We often muse about what heaven will really be like when we finally get there. To have even a few brief moments so close to God here on earth makes us long to stay in our little group. We know better each week how much we are going to love being in God's presence for eternity. However, each week we remind ourselves that we must leave so that we can tell others who do not yet know Jesus how they can know Jesus. He wants them to know Him the way we know Him.

When I initiated this model of prayer at our church, I wanted our original group to multiply into several other groups. I have begun to see that happen. One man from our group has started a men's prayer group. The second group to break off is a youth prayer group. I can see the changes taking place in the lives of people renewed by the Holy Spirit. Oh how I long to see our whole church experience this kind of renewal! When it takes place, our community will not be able to resist coming to see what God is doing among us. Praise His name!

Written by Stan Meador in 2002

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