

Lecture VIII. - Meetings for Prayer.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney emphasizes the importance of social prayer in promoting union among Christians, extending the spirit of prayer, moving God, and convicting and converting sinners.

Scripture: Matthew 18:19, Acts 1:14, Acts 2:42, Romans 12:12, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Hebrews 10:24-25, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14-15

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Unity in the Church"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the significance of prayer meetings, highlighting their role in fostering unity among Christians, extending the spirit of prayer, and moving God to bless His people. He outlines the proper conduct of these meetings, stressing the importance of focused prayer, the need for spiritual leadership, and the necessity of inviting sinners to participate. Finney warns against practices that can hinder the effectiveness of prayer meetings, such as lengthy prayers, cold confessions, and a lack of spiritual fervor. He concludes that prayer meetings are vital for the church's spiritual health and should aim directly at the conversion of sinners.

Transcript

TEXT. --"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." --MATTHEW xviii. 19.*

HITHERTO, in treating of the subject of PRAYER, I have confined my remarks to secret prayer. I am now to speak of social prayer, or prayer offered in company, where two or more are united in praying. Such meetings have been common from the time of Christ, and even hundreds of years before. And it is probable that God's people have always been in the habit of making united supplication, whenever they had the privilege. The propriety of the practice will not be questioned here. I need not dwell now on the duty of social prayer. Nor is it my design to discuss the question, whether any two Christians agreeing to ask any blessing, will be sure to obtain it. My object is to make some remarks on

MEETINGS FOR PRAYER.

I. The design of Prayer Meetings.

II. The manner of conducting them.

III. Mention several things that will defeat the design of holding them.

I. THE DESIGN OF PRAYER MEETINGS.

1. One design of assembling several persons together for united prayer, is to promote union among Christians. Nothing tends more to cement the hearts of Christians than praying together. Never do they love one another so well as when they witness the outpouring of each other's hearts in prayer. Their spirituality begets a feeling of union and confidence, highly important to the prosperity of the church. It is doubtful whether Christians can ever be otherwise than united, if they are in the habit of really praying together. And where they have had hard feelings and differences among themselves, they are all done away, by uniting in prayer. The great object is gained, if you can bring them really to unite in prayer. If this can be done, the difficulties vanish.

2. To extend the spirit of prayer. God has so constituted us, and such is the economy of his grace, that we are sympathetic beings, and communicate our feelings to each other. A minister, for instance, will often as it were breathe his own feelings into his congregation. The Spirit of God that inspires his soul, makes use of his feelings to influence his hearers, just as much as he makes use of the words he preaches. So he makes use of the feelings of Christians. Nothing is more calculated to beget a spirit of prayer, than to unite in social prayer, with one who has the spirit himself; unless this one should be so far ahead that his prayer will repel the rest. His prayer will awaken them, if they are not so far behind as to revolt at it and resist it. If they are anywhere near the standard of his feelings, his spirit will kindle, and burn, and spread all around. One individual in a church, that obtains a spirit of prayer, will often arouse a whole church, and extend the same spirit through the whole, and a general revival follows.

3. Another grand design of social prayer. is to move God. Not that it changes the mind and feelings of God. When we speak of moving God, as I have said in a former lecture, we do not mean that it alters the will of God. But when the right kind of prayer is offered by Christians, they are in such a state of mind, that it becomes proper for God to bestow a blessing. They are then prepared to receive it, and he gives because he is always the same, and always ready and happy to show mercy. When Christians are united, and praying as they ought, God opens the windows of heaven, and pours out his blessings till there is not room to receive them.

4. Another important design of prayer meetings is the conviction and conversion of sinners. When properly conducted, they are eminently calculated to produce this effect. Sinners are apt to be solemn when they hear Christians pray. Where there is a spirit of prayer, sinners must feel. An ungodly man, a Universalist, once said respecting a certain minister, "I can bear his preaching very well, but when he prays, I feel awfully; I feel as if God was coming down upon me." Sinners are often convicted by hearing prayer. A young man of distinguished talents, known to many of you, said concerning a certain minister to whom before his conversion he had been very much opposed, "As soon as he began to pray, I began to be convicted, and if he had continued to pray much longer, I should not have been able to contain myself." Just as soon as Christians begin to pray as they ought, sinners then know that they pray, and they feel awfully. They do not understand what spirituality is, because they have no experience of it. But when such prayer is offered, they know there is something in it; they know God is in it, and it brings them near to God; it makes them feel awfully solemn, and they cannot bear it. And not only is it calculated to impress the minds of sinners, but when Christians pray in faith, the Spirit of God is poured out, and sinners are melted down and converted on the spot.

II. THE MANNER OF CONDUCTING PRAYER MEETINGS.

1. It is often well to open a prayer meeting by reading a short portion of the word of God; especially if the person who takes the lead of the meeting, can call to mind any portion that will be applicable to the object or occasion, and that is impressive, and to the point. If he has no passage that is applicable, he had better not read any at all. Do not drag in the word of God to make up part of the meeting as a mere matter of form. This is an insult to God. It is not well to read any more than is applicable to the subject before the meeting, or the occasion. Some people think it always necessary to read a whole chapter, though it may be ever so long, and have a variety of subjects. It is just as impressive and judicious to read a whole chapter, as it would be for a minister to take a whole chapter for his text, when his object was to make some particular truth bear on the minds of his audience. The design of a prayer meeting should be to bring Christians to the point to pray for a definite object. Wandering over a large field, hinders and destroys this design.

2. It is proper that the person who leads should make some short and appropriate remarks, calculated to explain the nature of prayer, and the encouragements we have to pray, and to bring the object to be prayed for directly before the minds of the people.

A man can no more pray without having his thoughts concentrated, than he can do anything else. The person leading, should therefore see to this, by bringing up before their minds the object they came to pray for. If they came to pray for any object he can do this. And if they did not, they had better go home. It is of no use to stay there and mock God, by pretending to pray, when they have nothing on earth to pray for.

After stating the object, he should bring up some promise or some principle, as the ground of encouragement to expect an answer to their prayers. If there is any indication of Providence, or any promise, or any principle in the Divine government that affords a ground of faith, let him call it to mind, and not let them be talking out of their own hearts at random, without knowing any solid reason to expect an answer. One reason why prayer meetings mostly accomplish so little, is because there is so little common sense exercised about them. Instead of looking round for some solid footing on which to repose their faith, they just come together and pour forth their words, and neither know nor care whether they have any reason to expect an answer. If they are going to pray about anything concerning which there can be any doubt or any mistake, in regard to the ground of faith, they should be shown the reason there is for believing that their prayers will be heard and answered. It is easy to see, that unless something like this is done, three-fourths of them will have no idea of what they are doing, or of the ground on which they should expect to receive what they pray for.

3. In calling on persons to pray, it is always desirable to let things take their own course wherever it is safe. If it can be left so with safety, let those pray who are most inclined to pray. It sometimes happens that even those who are ordinarily the most spiritual, and most proper to be called on, are not at the time in a suitable frame; they may be cold and worldly, and only freeze the meeting. But if you let those pray who desire to pray, you avoid this. But often this cannot be done with safety, especially in large cities, where a prayer meeting might be liable to be interrupted by those who have no business to pray; some fanatic or crazy person, some hypocrite or enemy, who would only make a noise. In most places, however, this course may be taken with perfect safety. Give up the meeting to the Spirit of God, Those who desire to pray, let them pray. If the leader sees any thing that needs to be set right, let him remark, freely and kindly, and put it right, and then go on again. Only, he should be careful to time his remarks, so as not to interrupt the flow of feeling, or to chill the meeting, or turn off the minds from the proper subject.

4. If it is necessary to name the individuals who are to pray, it is best to call on those who are most spiritual first. And if you do not know who they are, then those whom you would naturally suppose to be most alive. If they pray at the outset, they will be likely to spread the spirit of prayer through the meeting, and elevate the tone of the whole. Otherwise, if you call on those who are cold and lifeless at the beginning, they will be likely to diffuse a chill throughout the meeting. The only hope of having an efficient prayer meeting is when at least a part of the church is spiritual, and they infuse their spirit into the rest. This is the very reason why it is often best to let things take their course, for then those who have the most feeling are apt to pray first, and give character to the meeting.

5. The prayers should always be very short. When individuals suffer themselves to pray long, they forget where they are, that they are only the mouth of the congregation, and that the congregation cannot be expected to sympathise with them, so as to go along and feel united in prayer, if they are long and tedious, and go all around the world and pray for every thing that they can think of. Commonly, those who pray long in meeting, do it not because they have the spirit of prayer, but because they have not. And they go round and round, not because they are full of prayer. Some men will spin out a long prayer in telling God who and what he is, or they exhort God to do so and so. Some pray out a whole system of divinity. Some preach, some exhort the people, till every body wishes they would stop, and God wishes so too, undoubtedly. They should keep to the point, and pray for what they came to pray for, and not follow the imagination of their own foolish hearts all over the universe.

6. Each one should pray for some one object. It is well for every individual to have one object for prayer: two or more may pray for the same thing, or each a separate object. If the meeting is convened to pray for some specific thing, let them all pray for that. If its object is more general, let them select their subjects, according as they feel interested in them. If one feels particularly disposed to pray for the church, let him do it. If the next feels disposed to pray for the church, he may do so too. Perhaps the next will feel inclined to pray for sinners; for the youth; to confess sin; let him do it, and as soon as he has got through let him stop. Whenever a man has deep feeling, he always feels on some particular point, and if he prays for that, he will speak out of the abundance of his heart, and then he will naturally stop when he is done. Those who feel most, will be most ready to confine their prayers to that point, and stop when they have done and not pray all over the world.

7. If in the progress of the meeting it becomes necessary to change the object of prayer, let the man who leads state the fact, and explain it in a few words. If the object is to pray for the church, or for backsliders, or sinners, or the heathen, let him state it plainly, and then turn it over and hold it up before them till he brings them to think and feel deeply before they pray. Then state to them the grounds on which they may repose their faith in regard to obtaining the blessings they pray for, if any such statement is needed, and so lead them right up to the throne, and let them take hold of the hand of God. This is according to the philosophy of the mind. People always do it for themselves when they pray in secret, if they really mean to pray to any purpose. And so it should be in prayer meetings.

8. It is important that the time should be fully occupied, so as not to leave long seasons of silence. This always makes a bad impression and chills the meeting. I know that sometimes churches have seasons of silent prayer. But in those cases they should be specially requested to pray in silence, so that all may know why they are silent. This often has a most powerful effect, where a few moments are spent by a whole congregation in silence, while all lift up their thoughts to God. This is very different from having long intervals of silence because there is nobody to pray. Every one feels that such a silence is like the cold damp of death over the meeting.

9. It is exceedingly important that he who leads the meeting should press sinners who may be present to immediate repentance. He should crowd this hard, and urge the Christians present to pray in such a way as to make sinners feel that they are expected to repent immediately. This tends to inspire Christians with compassion and love for souls. The remarks made to sinners are often like pouring fire upon the hearts of Christians, to awaken them to prayer and effort for their conversion. Let them see and feel the guilt and danger of sinners right among them, and then they will pray.

III. I am to mention several things which may defeat the design of a prayer meeting.

1. When there is an unhappy want of confidence in the leader, there is no hope of any good. Whatever the cause may be, whether he is to blame or not, the very fact that he leads the meeting will cast a damp over it and prevent all good. I have witnessed it in churches, where there was some offensive elder or deacon, perhaps justly offensive, and perhaps not, set to lead the prayer meeting, and the meeting would all die under his influence. If there is a want of confidence in regard to his piety, or in his ability, or in his judgment, or in anything connected with the meeting, everything he says or does will fall to the ground. The same thing often takes place where the church have lost their confidence in the minister.

2. Where the leader lacks spirituality, there will be a dryness and coldness in his remarks and prayers, and every thing will indicate his want of unction, and his whole influence will be the very reverse of what it ought to be. I have known churches where a prayer meeting could not be sustained, and the reason was not obvious, but those who understood the state of things knew that the leader was so notorious for his want of spirituality, that he would inevitably freeze a prayer meeting to death. In many Presbyterian churches the elders are so far from being spiritual men that they always freeze a prayer meeting. And then they are often amazingly jealous for their dignity, and cannot bear to have any body else lead the meeting. And if any member that is spiritual takes the lead of a prayer meeting, they will take him to task for it: "Why, you are not an elder, and ought not to lead a prayer meeting in presence of an elder." And thus they stand in the way, while the whole church is suffering under their blighting influence.

A man who knows he is not in a spiritual frame of mind has no business to conduct a prayer meeting; he will kill it. There are two reasons: First, he will have no spiritual discernment, and will not know what to do, or when to do it. A person who is spiritual can see the movements of Providence, and can feel the Spirit of God, and understand what he is leading them to pray for, so as to time his subjects, and take advantage of the state of feeling among Christians. He will not overthrow all the feeling in a meeting by introducing other things that are incongruous or ill-timed. He has spiritual discernment to understand the leadings of the Spirit, and his workings in those who pray, and to follow on as the Spirit leads. Suppose an individual leads who is not spiritual, and there are two or three prayers, and the spirit of prayer rises, but the leader has no spiritual discernment to see it, and he makes some remarks on another point, or reads a piece out of some book, that is as far from the feeling of the meeting as the north pole. It may be just as evident to others what they are called to pray for, as if the Son of God himself had come into the meeting and named the subject; but the leader will overthrow it all, because he is so stupid that he does not know the indications of the meeting.

And then, if the leader is not spiritual, he will very likely be dull and dry in his remarks and in all his exercises. He will read a long hymn in a dreamy manner, and then read a long passage of Scripture, in a tone so cold and wintry that he will spread a wintry pall over the meeting, and it will be dull as long as his cold heart is placed up in front of the whole thing.

3. A want of suitable talents in the leader. If he is wanting in that kind of talents which are fitted to make a meeting useful, he will injure the meeting. If he can say nothing, or if his remarks are so out of the way as to produce levity or contempt, or if they have nothing in them that will impress the mind, or are not guided by good sense, or not appropriate, he will injure the meeting. A man may be pious, but so weak that his prayers do not edify, but rather disgust, the people present. When this is so, he had better keep silence.

4. Sometimes the benefit of a prayer-meeting is defeated by a bad spirit in the leader. For instance when there is a revival, and great opposition, if a leader gets up in a prayer meeting and speaks of instances of opposition, and comments upon them, and thus diverts the meeting away from the object they come to pray for, he knows not what spirit he is of. Its effect is always ruinous to a prayer meeting. Let a minister in a revival come out and preach against the opposition, and he will infallibly destroy the revival, and turn the hearts of Christians away from their proper object. Let the man who is set to lead the church be careful to guard his own spirit, lest he should mislead the church, and diffuse a wrong temper. The same will be true, if any one who is called upon to speak or pray, introduces in his remarks or prayers anything controversial, impertinent, unreasonable, unscriptural, ridiculous or irrelevant. Any of these things will quench the tender breathings of the spirit of prayer, and destroy the meeting.

5. Persons coming late to the meeting. This is a very great hindrance to a prayer meeting. When people have begun to pray, and their attention is fixed, and they have shut their eyes and closed their ears, to keep out everything from their minds, in the midst of a prayer somebody will come bolting in and walk up through the room. Some will look up, and all have their minds interrupted for the moment. Then they all get fixed again, and another comes in, and so on. Why, I suppose the devil would not care how many Christians went to a prayer-meeting, if they will only go after the meeting is begun. He would be glad to have ever so many go scattering along so, and dodging in very piously after the meeting is begun.

6. When persons make cold prayers, and cold confessions of sin, they are sure to quench the spirit of prayer. When the influences of the Spirit are enjoyed, in the midst of the warm expressions that are flowing forth, let an individual come in who is cold, and pour his cold breath out, like the damp of death, and it will make every Christian that has any feeling want to get out of the meeting.

7. In some places it is common to begin a prayer meeting by reading a long portion of Scripture. Then the deacon or elder gives out a long hymn. Next, they sing it. Then he prays a long prayer, praying for the Jews and the fullness of the Gentiles, and many other objects that have nothing to do with the occasion of the meeting. After that perhaps he reads a long extract from some book or magazine. Then they have another long hymn and another long prayer, and then they go home. I once heard an elder say, they had kept up a prayer meeting so many years, and yet there had been no revival in the place. The truth was, that the officers of the church had been accustomed to carry on the meetings in just such a dignified way, and their dignity would not allow anything to be altered. No wonder there was no revival. Such prayer meetings are enough to hinder a revival. And if ever so many revivals should commence, the prayer meeting would destroy them. There was a prayer meeting once in this city, as I have been told, where there appeared to be some feeling, and some one proposed that they should have two or three prayers in succession, without rising from their knees. One dignified man present opposed it, and said that they never had done so, and he hoped there would be no innovations. He did not approve of innovations. And that was the last of the revival. Such persons have their prayer meetings stereotyped, and they are determined not to turn out of their track, whether they have the blessing or not. To allow any such thing would be a new measure, and they never like new measures.

8. A great deal of singing often injures a prayer meeting. The agonizing spirit of prayer does not lead people to sing. There is a time for everything; a time to sing, and a time to pray. But if I know what it is to travail in birth for souls, Christians never feel less like singing, than when they have the spirit of prayer for sinners. Singing is the natural expression of feelings that are joyful and cheerful. The spirit of prayer is not a spirit of joy. It is a spirit of travail, and agony of soul, supplicating and pleading with God with strong cryings, and groanings that cannot be uttered. This is more like any thing else than it is like singing. I have known states of feeling, where you could not distress the people of God more than to begin to sing. It would be so entirely different from their feelings. Why, if you knew your house was on fire, would you first stop and sing a hymn before you put it out? How would it look here in New York, when a building was on fire, and the firemen are all collected, for the foreman to stop and sing a hymn? It is just about as natural for the people to sing when exercised with a spirit of prayer. When people feel like pulling men out of the fire, they do not feel like singing. I never knew a singing revival amount to much. Its tendency is to do away all deep feeling. It is true that singing a hymn has sometimes produced a powerful effect upon sinners who are convicted, but in general it is the perfect contrast there is between their feelings and those of the happy souls who sing, that produces the effect. If the hymn be of a joyful character it is not directly calculated to benefit sinners, and is highly fitted to relieve the mental anguish of the Christian, so as to destroy that travail of soul which is indispensable to his prevailing in prayer.

When singing is introduced in a prayer-meeting, the hymns should be short, and so selected as to bring out something solemn; some striking words, such as the Judgment Hymn, and others calculated to produce an effect on sinners; or something that will produce a deep impression on the minds of Christians; but not that joyful kind of singing, that makes every body feel comfortable, and turns off the mind from the object of the prayer meeting.

I once heard a celebrated organist produce a remarkable effect in a protracted meeting. The organ was a powerful one, and the double bass pipes were like thunder. The hymn was given out that has these lines:

See the storm of vengeance gathering

O'er the path you dare to tread;

"Hear the awful thunder rolling,

Loud and louder o'er your head."

When he came to these words, we first heard the distant roar of thunder, then it grew nearer and louder, till at the word "louder," there was a crash that seemed almost to overpower the whole congregation.

Such things in their proper place do good. But common singing dissipates feeling. It should always be such as not to take away feeling, but to deepen it.

Often a prayer meeting is injured by calling on the young converts to sing joyful hymns. This is highly improper in a prayer meeting. It is no time for them to let feeling flow away in joyful singing, while so many sinners around them, and their own former companions, are going down to hell. A revival is often put down by the church and minister all giving themselves up to singing with young converts. Thus by stopping to rejoice, when they ought to feel more and more deeply for sinners, they grieve away the Spirit of God, and they soon find that their agony and travail of soul are all gone.

9. Introducing subjects of controversy into prayer will defeat a prayer meeting. Nothing of a controversial nature should be introduced into prayer, unless it is the object of the meeting to settle that thing. Otherwise, let Christians come together in their prayer-meetings, on the broad ground of offering united prayer for a common object. And let controversies be settled somewhere else.

10. Great pains should be taken, both by the leader and others, to watch narrowly the motions of the Spirit of God. Let them not pray without the Spirit, but follow his leadings. Be sure not to quench the Spirit for the sake of praying according to the regular custom. Avoid everything calculated to divert attention away from the object. All affectation of feeling that is not real, should be particularly guarded against. If there is an affectation of feeling, most commonly others see and feel that it is affectation, not reality. At any rate, the Spirit of God knows it, and will be grieved, and leave the place. On the other hand, all resistance to the Spirit will equally destroy the meeting. Not unfrequently it happens, that there are some so cold that if any one should break out in the spirit of prayer, they would call it fanaticism, and perhaps break out in opposition.

11. If individuals refuse to pray when they are called on it injures a prayer meeting. There are some people, who always pretend they have no gifts. Women sometimes refuse to take their turn in prayer, and pretend they have no ability to pray. But if any one else should say so, they would be offended. Suppose they should know that any other person had made such a remark as this, "Do not ask her to pray; she cannot pray; she has not talents enough;" would they like it? So with a man who pretends he has no gifts, let any one else report that he has not talents enough to make a decent prayer, and see if he will like it. The pretence is not sincere; it is all a sham.

Some say they cannot pray in their families, they have no gift. But a person could not offend them more than to say they cannot pray a decent prayer before their own families. They would say, "Why, the man talks as if he thought nobody else had any gifts but himself." People are not apt to have such a low opinion of themselves. I have often seen the curse of God follow such professors. They have no excuse. God will take none. The man has got a tongue to talk to his neighbors, and he can talk to God if he has any heart for it. You will see their children unconverted, their son a curse, their daughter--tongue cannot tell. God says he will pour out his fury on the families that call not on his name. If I had time, I could mention a host of facts to show that God MARKS those individuals with his disapprobation and curse who refuse to pray when they ought. Until professors of religion will repent of this sin and take up the cross (if they choose to call praying a cross!) and do their duty, they need not expect a blessing.

12. Prayer meetings are often too long. They should always be dismissed while Christians have feeling, and not be spun out until all feeling is exhausted, and the Spirit is gone.

13. Heartless confessions. People confess their sins and do not forsake them. Every week they will make the same confession over again. A long, cold, dull, stupid confession this week, and then the next week another just like it, without forsaking any sins. Why, they have no intention to forsake their sins! It shows plainly that they do not mean to reform. All their religion consists in these confessions. Instead of getting a blessing from God by such confessions they will get only a curse.

14. When Christians spend all the time in praying for themselves. They should have done this in their closets. When they come to a prayer meeting, they should be prepared to offer effectual intercessions for others. If Christians pray in their closets as they ought, they will feel like praying for sinners. If they pray exclusively in their closets for themselves, they will not get the spirit of prayer. I have known men shut

themselves up for days to pray for themselves, and never get any life, because their prayers are all selfish. But if they will just forget themselves, and throw their hearts abroad, and pray for others, it will wake up such a feeling, that they can pour forth their hearts. And then they can go to work for souls. I knew an individual in a revival, who shut himself up seventeen days, and prayed as if he would have God come to his terms, but it would not do, and then he went out to work, and immediately he had the Spirit of God in his soul. It is well for Christians to pray for themselves, and confess their sins, and then throw their hearts abroad, till they feel as they ought.

15. Prayer meetings are often defeated by the want of appropriate remarks. The things are not said which are calculated to lead them to pray. Perhaps the leader has not prepared himself; or perhaps he has not the requisite talents, to lead the church out in prayer, or he does not lead their minds to dwell on the appropriate topics of prayer.

16. When individuals who are justly obnoxious for any cause, are forward in speaking and praying. Such persons are sometimes very much set upon taking a part. They say it is their duty to get up and testify for God on all occasions. They will say, they know they are not able to edify the church, but nobody else can do their duty, and they wish to testify. Perhaps the only place they ever did testify for God was in a prayer meeting; all their lives, out of the meeting, testify against God. They had better keep still.

17. Where persons take a part who are so illiterate that it is impossible persons of taste should not be disgusted. Persons of intelligence cannot follow them, and their minds are unavoidably diverted. I do not mean that it is necessary a person should have a liberal education in order to lead in prayer. All persons of common education, especially if they are in the habit of praying, can lead in prayer, if they have the spirit of prayer. But there are some persons who use such absurd and illiterate expressions, as cannot but disgust every intelligent mind. They cannot help being disgusted. The feeling of disgust is an involuntary thing, and when a disgusting object is before the mind, the feeling is irresistible. Piety will not keep a person from feeling it. The only way is to take away the object. If such persons mean to do good, they had better remain silent. Some of them may feel grieved at not being called to take a part. But it is better that they should be kindly told the reason than to have the prayer meeting regularly injured, and rendered ridiculous by their performances.

18. A want of union in prayer. When one leads the others do not follow, but are thinking of something else. Their hearts do not unite, do not say, Amen. It is as bad as if one should make a petition and another remonstrate against it. One asks God to do a thing, and the others ask him not to do it, or to do something else.

REMARKS.

1. An illy conducted prayer meeting often does more hurt than good. In many churches, the general manner of conducting prayer meetings is such that Christians have not the least idea of the design or the power of such meetings. It is such as tends to keep down rather than to promote pious feeling and the spirit of prayer.

2. A prayer meeting is an index to the state of religion in a church. If the church neglect the prayer meetings, or come and have not the spirit of prayer, you know of course that religion is low. Let me go into the prayer meeting, and I can always see the state of religion there.

3. Every minister ought to know that if the prayer meetings are neglected, all his labors are in vain. Unless he can get Christians to attend the prayer meetings, all he can do will not bring up the true religion.

4. A great responsibility rests on him who leads a prayer meeting. If the prayer meeting be not what it ought to be, if it does not elevate the state of religion, he should go seriously to work and see what is the matter, and get the spirit of prayer, and prepare himself to make such remarks as are calculated to do good and set things right. A leader has no business to lead prayer meetings, if he is not prepared, both in head and heart, to do this. I wish you, who lead the district prayer meetings of this church, to notice this point.

5. Prayer meetings are the most difficult meetings to sustain as they ought to be. They are so spiritual, that unless the leader be peculiarly prepared, both in heart and mind, they will dwindle. It is in vain for the leader to complain that members of the church do not attend. In nine cases out of ten, it is the leader's fault, that they do not attend. If he felt as he ought, they would find the meetings so interesting, that they would attend of course. If he is so cold, and dull, and without spirituality, as to freeze every thing, no wonder people do not come to the meeting. Church officers often complain and scold because people do not come to the prayer meeting, when the truth is, they themselves are so cold that they freeze every body to death that comes.

6. Prayer meetings are most important meetings for the church. It is highly important for Christians to sustain the prayer meetings:--

(1.) To promote union.

(2.) To increase brotherly love.

(3.) To cultivate Christian confidence.

(4.) To promote their own growth in grace.

(5.) To cherish and advance spirituality.

7. Prayer meetings should be so numerous in the church, and be so arranged, as to exercise the gifts of every individual member of the church--male and female. Every one should have the opportunity to pray, and to express the feelings of his heart, if he has any. The sectional prayer meetings of this church are designed to do this. And if they are too large for this, let them be divided, so as to bring the entire mass into the work, to exercise all gifts, and diffuse union, confidence, and brotherly love through the whole.

8. It is important that impenitent sinners should always attend prayer meetings. If none come of their own accord, go out and invite them. Christians ought to take great pains to induce their impenitent friends and neighbors to come to prayer meetings. They can pray better for impenitent sinners when they have them right before their eyes. I have know female prayer meetings exclude sinners from the meeting. And the reason was, they were so proud they were ashamed to pray before sinners. What a spirit! Such prayers will do no good. They insult God. You have not done enough, by any means, when you have gone to the prayer meeting yourself. You cannot pray, if you have invited no sinner to go. If all the church have neglected their duty so, and have gone to the prayer meeting, and taken no sinners along with them, no subjects of prayer--what have they come for?

9. The great object of all the means of grace is to aim directly at the conversion of sinners. You should pray that they may be converted there. Not pray that they may be awakened and convicted, but pray that they may be converted on the spot. No one should either pray or make any remarks, as if he expected a single sinner would go away without giving his heart to God. You should all make the impression on his mind, that NOW he must submit. And if you do this, while you are yet speaking God will hear. If Christians make it manifest that they have really set their hearts on the conversions of sinners, and are bent upon it, and pray as they ought, there would rarely be a prayer meeting held without souls being converted, and sometimes every sinner in the room. That is the very time, if ever, that sinners should be converted in answer to those prayers. I do not doubt but that you may have sinners converted in every sectional prayer meeting, if you do your duty. Take them there, take your families, your friends, or your neighbors there with that design, give them the proper instruction, if they need instruction, and pray for them as you ought, and you will save their souls. Rely upon it, if you do your duty, in a right manner, God will not keep back his blessing, and the work will be done.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/lecture-viii-meetings-for-prayer/>

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