

The Primitive Prayer-Meeting

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of unity, earnestness, and faith in God for effective prayer, using the example of the prayer-meeting at Pentecost.

Scripture: Acts 1:14, Acts 2:1

Topics: "The Power of the Holy Spirit", "Unity in Prayer"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the significance of the primitive prayer-meeting held by the disciples after Christ's ascension, where they gathered in unity to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He highlights the characteristics of this meeting, including the full participation of all members, their earnestness, and their unwavering expectation of God's promise. Finney contrasts this with modern prayer-meetings, which often lack attendance, unity, and fervor, suggesting that such deficiencies hinder the effectiveness of prayer. The results of the original meeting were profound, leading to the conversion of thousands and the empowerment of the disciples for their mission. He calls for a return to the earnestness and unity of the early church in contemporary prayer practices.

Transcript

"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication."--Acts 1:14

In the context we have an account of Christ's last interview with his disciples. They had assembled at his request; he met them, "spoke to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God;" commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, assuring them that they "should be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence;" and then was taken up from their sight. They returned to Jerusalem, went into an upper room, and there "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." These, in brief, are the circumstances of this wonderful prayer-meeting.

I propose to notice,

I. The object of this prayer-meeting;

II. Its characteristics;

III. Its results.

I. The special object of this meeting was to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit upon themselves and the world. It had been promised, even from Abraham, down the long line of holy seers, that in connection with the advent of Christ, the Spirit should be given. Christ reminded his disciples of this great promise and bade them tarry in Jerusalem and wait for its fulfillment. He had given them their great commission, to go forth into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature; but he would have them plainly understand that they could do nothing without his Spirit, and therefore they must by all means wait in Jerusalem till they had received this anointing of the Father. That they might the better understand this baptism he referred to John's mission and work, saying--"John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost, not many days hence." That baptism was only a type; this was to be the very thing symbolized.

This meeting to pray for the descent of the Spirit continued not less than ten days. From the Passover at which Christ suffered, he met with them on various occasions during forty days; then ascended to heaven. The feast of Pentecost was, as its name imports, just fifty days after the Passover. The interval from the ascension to the Pentecost, ten days, was the duration of this remarkable prayer-meeting; for we are told that when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were still "all with one accord in one place."

II. Of the characteristics of this meeting, the first to be noticed is that the brethren and sisters were all present. This is a prominent peculiarity, and deserves distinct and special notice. The sacred historian is careful to call attention to the fact. "Peter stood up among them, the number of the names together were about an hundred and twenty." All the eleven were there, "with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brethren." Not one could be spared. What, suppose ye, Christ would have thought, if only two or three had come, and the rest had been too indifferent or too much engrossed in other business to be there? They did not allow any other business to detain them. They honored God enough to meet on his special call and to stay till the object of the meeting was accomplished.

They were all interested in the object. This is manifest in the fact that they all came and all remained together so long, and indeed until the object was attained. Not only were they all there, but all held on through those long sessions. This shows them really in earnest.

They expected the promised blessing. They knew Christ had promised it, and they believed his promise. Of course their faith became a strong and definite expectation.

Yet again, they were united. Over and over again, we are told they were all with one accord in one place. United in the one desire to obtain this great blessing, and of one heart in regard to the motives which led them to pray, there was the most entire unanimity, as if the whole company had but one heart, and that were strong and true in its impulse and purposes.

They were united in fraternal confidence. There is no hint of any loss or lack of confidence in each other. Hence they could edify each other. Their communion of soul was deep and precious.

They persevered. "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." They were instant in their prayer until the object was gained. They could not think of giving up and abandoning their effort before the blessing came. They said as Jacob in his wrestlings, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." What could they do without the Spirit! Besides, Christ had distinctly told them not to go until the blessing came.

I said that the brethren and sisters both were there. this was contrary to the doctrine and practice of the Jews then, and indeed is so to this day. They do not admit women to sit with themselves in their holy places, in their seasons of worship. They are allowed to occupy only the galleries, from which they may look down as spectators, not being expected to join as associate worshippers. In public acts of devotion they might have no part. Not so under the gospel. In Christ there must be no distinction between bond and free, male and female. All were to be one in him. All their old Jewish prejudices were discarded. This was a most important fact in the constitution of the Christian church. Until Christ came, no such meeting of brethren and sisters on the same level had been known. The particularity with which this circumstance is recorded, shows that a new era had opened. No partition wall is henceforth to thrust the female sex into the court of the woman, or into the distant galleries; all sexes are counted alike as brethren in Christ Jesus.

Observe also that there is no sectarian spirit or party spirit or party strife among them. No party prejudice was there; all were true Christian brethren. The division of the Christian church into parties and sects, now so great an evil, was then unknown. Men were not then stickling for little things, were not building up new denominations on a basis so unworthy as a mere difference in forms or even in the forms of a form. The controversies of later days about ordinances had not yet begun to distract and rend the body of Christ. Nor was there then any strife for leadership. Diotrephes and his sect had not then appeared in the Christian church.

You may think me censorious in having intimated that the ambition of leadership makes sects. I wish there was no truth in this intimation. But who does not know it to be but too sadly true!

Moreover, there was no caviling against the truth, or against judiciously proposed measures. Suspicion had no room in their kindred bosoms. They had no disposition to resist each other's prayer; there were none to whisper--I am not edified with this brother's prayer, or by the prayer of that sister. All with one accord, as well as all in one place! This must have been a charming season--a meeting in which loving hearts blended in holy sympathy.

It was, finally, a deeply earnest meeting. No apathetic souls were there, lagging and hanging as dead weights on the general heart of the assembly. All seemed to take as equally deep and warm interest in the great supplications they were convened to pour out before their ascended Lord for the great blessing of the Christian dispensation.

III. Results. In brief, these are soon told. Three thousand were converted under one short sermon. The Holy Ghost fell on the disciples with great power, and from them the blessing diffused itself on every hand to the thousands who believed. The little band found themselves launched forth upon the greatest enterprise ever undertaken by mortals; and withal, drawn into such relations of faith and sustaining strength towards God and their ascended Savior as had never been realized on earth before. The conversion of the world to Jesus had fairly begun and the mission of the Spirit was opened.

REMARKS.

This is doubtless to be taken as a model prayer-meeting--substantially, in its spirit and leading circumstances, what a prayer-meeting ought to be. Why not? There is nothing here that should not be in all prayer-meetings for objects of similar importance.

Yet who can fail to notice that most prayer-meetings are nearly the reverse of this, in all their characteristic features? What do you see now in prayer-meetings appointed to pray for the conversion of sinners? Only a little handful of Christians present; the rest of the church pouring contempt on the very call for a meeting! It is easy to see that this must be regarded by Christ as a real insult. A meeting is called, yet but few have interest enough to attend! What would you think if, a notice being given out for a meeting at our church to invite some distinguished personage to come and visit us--say LaFayette, or Kossuth, or some one to whom the nation were under the very greatest obligations; the call for a meeting is given out; it appears in the daily papers; but when the hour arrives, only a very few are present! The people do not come! Suppose this distinguished stranger is informed how thin this meeting is; will he come? Will he not deem the very call an insult? So when meetings are appointed to invite the Lord Jesus, and almost none attend, will he come? Nay, verily; why should he come? There is no unanimity in the invitation. The understanding is they are not unanimous in inviting him to come. You will say, perhaps, that you did not intend your absence to mean just that. You did not mean to say that you did not want the Savior to come. You had your special reasons for being absent. You had an excuse; but do you think such excuses would avail in the case of any distinguished personage? Suppose the meeting had been called to invite General Washington; but very few attend; yet they send on to him their excuses for non-attendance; they tell him they were all very busy; some had sickness in their family, and some were taking care of various home concerns; they really felt the highest respect for him, &c., &c. Would their apologies avail? Would it not be regarded as a downright insult to ask so great a man to come among us, and yet in a called meeting to invite him, have only a mere handful present?

Now does not this apply in the case of prayer to God? Indeed it does. The prayer-meeting is specially called for the purpose of inviting him to come among us. It is important to know who want him to come; how many they are; and how much they desire his coming. The call of a meeting is the proper way to test and determine all these points. If the result shows that but very few care enough about it to even appear at the meeting, what can be expected but a failure in the great object of inducing him to make us a visit? Suppose the meeting at the day of Pentecost and during those previous days had been very thin, would the blessing have descended? Who can suppose it would?

We may have a prayer-meeting and urge the very strongest reasons for the descent of God's Spirit; but what avails it--if we are only a small minority of those who are in the church?

How much worse still is the case in our modern prayer-meeting if even those who do attend are manifestly not by any means earnest in prayer! How often we see this to be undoubtedly the case. They do not press their plea for a visitation of mercy from on high. They do not struggle long and earnestly as those praying souls did in the first great primitive prayer-meeting. These pleas and prayers are as different from those as can well be imagined. Let no one wonder that these movements are so unavailing!

Prayer is wont to be offered now with very little expectation. So great a lack of expectation denotes lack of faith in God, and therefore must fail to please him.

People think they cannot take time for continuous prayer. To keep up a prayer-meeting a whole week, is quite too much to think of! They have by no means brought their views up to the point of praying till the blessing comes. They do not feel earnest enough, nor are they sufficiently pressed with a sense of want to make this seem a small thing compared with the greatness of the blessing sought. They think they do well if they pray a little at one meeting per week, keep up one weekly meeting, and spend even that mostly in something else than prayer. What can be expected from such efforts?

Perhaps there is not unanimity enough, nor brotherly love enough to sustain even one weekly prayer-meeting. This is the case in many churches and in many neighborhoods. Is it so here in some portion of this great church?

Even where general prayer-meetings can be kept up, and are so, yet neighborhood prayer-meetings fall through. Alienations of feeling arise among brethren and sisters; bickerings, bad blood and bad words are there; they lose confidence in each other, and cannot pray together! How awful! How different from the spirit of the day of Pentecost! There, all the assembled brethren and sisters were of one heart and one soul! The tears were scarcely dry on the cheek of the penitent Peter; Thomas had not recovered from the deep mortification, shame and grief of his unbelief, yet even these feelings did not stand in the way of the most entire union of heart and soul in prayer for the great promised blessing.

Yet in how many churches you are astonished to find the prayer-meeting abandoned; the hearts of brethren soured and alienated; confidence almost gone, and worse than all the rest, few left to mourn over this deplorable state of Zion. You may find, here and there, a brother or a sister mournfully asking, "What shall we do for a prayer-meeting in our neighborhood? There is not brotherly love and confidence enough here to sustain one." You would be astonished to know how often this is the case. Sometimes a family prayer-meeting drops to pieces in the same way. Alienation in some form arises; they lose confidence in each other's prayers, and interest in each other's welfare; and, of course, they cease to pray with and for each other. Under such influences, Christians are not interested in each other's prayers, and are not led onward and edified by mutual prayer. Where alienation exists, and mutual sympathy is lacking, there can be no union of heart in prayer, and no spiritual edification. You have often noticed in a prayer-meeting that the brethren and sisters will be greatly quickened and edified by one brother's prayer, and not at all by another's. When one prays, it is most manifest that the hearts of all are moved; there is a sighing, an uplifting of heart, a general response; but when another leads, you see no such tokens of general sympathy. You can tell who can lead the hearts of the brethren in real prayer. You will always notice that no one can do this unless they have confidence in him, and unless they feel the deep pulsations of his heart moving upon their own. Sometimes this is seen in the family. The head of the family prays, but all have lost confidence in him, and are doing anything else and everything else but unite in his words of prayer. Is it wonderful that such prayer avails nothing? Indeed, the very expressions which such a man may use in prayer, will be interpreted as only so much hypocrisy! Alas, the spirit of prayer cannot be there! The spirit of dissent, and not the spirit of union, is there; they do not pray together, and cannot; they are not united in prayer; a spirit of alienation exists, unexpressed, but deep; perhaps their will is up about something. Even husband and wife do not pray together; they are chafed in their feelings toward each other, and are indulging a state of mind which forbids a spirit of mutual prayer. Often our prayer-meetings die out by reason of little bickerings and heart-burnings.

Brethren and sisters, will you not look to this?

Often, when people stay away from meetings for prayer, they assign other than the true and real reason. They do not say frankly, I stay away because I cannot hear this or that brother pray. They profess to be too busy--too much and too urgently occupied; but really they do not assign even to themselves the true reason--the very thing which has kept them back from the meeting.

At the Pentecost meeting, they neglected all other business. Yet they were poor in this world's goods, and had, no doubt, business enough to do; their women, also, had enough to do; yet they were all there. But suppose it had been the case that they felt their business to be too important to be dropped. Suppose they

had said--"O, it cannot be necessary for us all to go; we are so full of business, and so pressed every way, and so fatigued withal;" do you believe that, making such excuses for neglect of prayer, they could have had the blessing? If they could not fulfill the condition, could they hope to receive the promise? If they would not meet the demand made by the condition, obviously the way would not be open for Christ to fulfill his promise. He could not grant them the blessing without virtually giving a bounty to remissness and unfaithfulness.

The fact is, brethren, our modern prayer-meetings are too cold and too constrained. Christians are not earnest in prayer. Their souls cannot become deeply burdened and earnestly agonized in supplication; they do not thirst enough for spiritual blessings, and have not the deep communion with God which is requisite for prevailing prayer. You know what a burden is felt in a prayer-meeting when the heart is thoroughly broken; when pride is abased, the soul humbled, and the entire energies are drawn out in earnest supplication. But there are few such meetings for prayer now. There is a lack of sustaining unanimity. It is a law of mind that union of heart sustains the interest and power of prayer. Did you never observe how you can sustain another in prayer, if you enter deeply into his sympathies? You uphold his faith and his fervor. I have often thought that the practice common among the Methodists, is useful if not abused. The responses that truly come from the heart serve to quicken and sustain genuine prayer. The responses introduced in the service of the Church of England are excellent, provided only that the heart be in them. I love to hear these sustaining responses and to know that I have the sympathizing heart of those who profess to be praying with me. Often our prayer-meetings are cold and profitless because there is no liberty and no free utterance. The spirit of prayer is straitened, because the natural expressions of deep feeling are repressed. Said an English Congregationalist, "I do wish our people could learn of the Methodists how to have a prayer-meeting." He felt the need of an unconstrained utterance and of a free expression of feeling. Now I would not sanction heartless noise and vociferation; that is not prayer and cannot help real prayer. There is a wide difference between that and a meeting in which the heart has free scope, and the Spirit of God is not straitened, but ranges with free scope and melting power. I have seen prayer-meetings in which manifestly the whole congregation went forth before God in mighty prayer. Some of you have seen such prayer. The hearts of the people were moved as the trees of the forest before a mighty rushing wind.--Words seem as if frightened with irrepressible emotion. You can see that God is there. Everyone feels it. An awe of the Holy Presence pervades each heart. And yet they are not afraid, but are drawn into sweet confidence and most earnest pleading. Literally they seem to pour out their hearts before him. This is true prayer, and meets the idea of social praying. It is a union of hearts before God's mercy-seat, the Spirit coming down to make intercession with their spirit with groanings that cannot be uttered. Every prayer-meeting should bear this character, modified only according to the type of those circumstances that call for prayer.

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