

The Extraordinary Importance of Corporate Prayer

United and Ignited

Those who believe in the power of prayer would never question the importance of individual prayer. We know we need to grow in our personal prayer lives. But some dimensions of prayer can only take place when we step beyond individual prayer practices and into the realm of corporate prayer. The term *corporate* prayer does not simply refer to praying with other people. In fact, it is possible to pray individual prayers in a group setting. Rather, I am referring to prayers that are *influenced* by the prayers of others—and, in turn, influence the prayers of others. I am referring to prayers that flow more from listening than from lists. These are prayers of *agreement* or *harmonious* prayers. We could call them *symphonic* prayers. In fact, the word Jesus used in Matthew 18:19 most often translated *agree* is the word from which we get our English word *symphony*: “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

When you think of corporate prayer, think of a group of people playing (or praying) a symphony from the same score, under the same Conductor, but playing their own unique instrument. They contribute just the right notes at just the right time. It is not simply that I am praying what is on my heart. It is that, together, we are praying what is on God’s heart. The result is not only that Jesus hears more prayer, but that He hears one prayer from many voices.

Prayer that Attracts Christ

There are at least three important factors in dynamic corporate prayer: First, the pray-ers are all sensitive to the Holy Spirit and do not bring their own prayer agendas with them. Second, worship is more than a tag at the beginning or the end of the time of prayer. It is a key part of the entire prayer experience. Third, Scripture sets and guides the themes of prayer. There may be a major topic of prayer, but our prayers are shaped more by God’s thoughts in Scripture than by our own thoughts. This is the kind of prayer that, according to Matthew 18:20, attracts the presence of Jesus in a unique way (“there am I with them”). Jesus is always with us, but He says He will be there in a special way when we pray corporate prayers. This is the kind of prayer that seemed to be taking place in Acts 4 and 13. This is the kind of prayer that is happening more and more in the church today. This is the kind of prayer that, as it increases, will produce deeper fulfillment in the pray-er and greater impact in our world. It unites and it ignites.

Corporate Prayer Unites Us

Prayer has a unique capacity to unite the pray-ers. When my wife and I were engaged, after a short but good time of prayer, I remember thinking, *Wow, I know her much better after this time of prayer than if we would have spent much more time just talking to one another.* This has proven true over and over again in our relationship. When we speak to God in a safe environment and allow others to listen in on the conversation, we speak in a deeper way than when we simply speak to one another. Corporate prayer allows us to hear each other’s hearts. I have seen this work in groups of pastors who either did not know or did not like each other. As pastors have gathered from different denominational or racial backgrounds and spent time hearing one another pour their hearts out in worship and intercession, they have concluded that they really do have much more that unites them than divides them. After a time of corporate prayer they have seen one another as true brothers and have even become great friends. But the uniting does not stop on the horizontal plane. There is a deeper connection with God that can only happen in corporate prayer. We get to know God more as we hear others who pray from a different personality, background, or theological perspective. In Ephesians, Paul says that one reason he is praying for the Ephesian saints is, “so that they would know Him better” (1:17). This is a key reason to pray. In Colossians 2:2–3, Paul, in a series of thoughts, demonstrates how this can happen: “My purpose [goal] is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, *so that* they may have the full riches of complete understanding, *in order that* they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ” (emphasis added).

Paul's thinking begins with believers being encouraged in heart and *united in love*. Prayer produces that kind of unity.

This unity will lead them to the full riches of understanding. This, in turn, will allow them to know the mystery of God, which is Jesus Christ Himself! On many occasions I have had my understanding of Jesus Christ enlarged and even corrected as I have heard the prayers of people who know Christ differently (and in many cases better) than I have known Him. If we never pray with people from other portions of the Body of Christ, our view of Jesus can be limited to what we already know.

Corporate Prayer Ignites Us

But deeper relationship is not the only value of corporate prayer. God uses corporate prayer to stir us and bring us more in line with His purposes. He uses corporate prayer to bring about personal renewal, fresh vision, greater passion, increased faith, and clear direction in His saints. At a prayer retreat for the leadership of one congregation, the pastor sensed God had something He wanted to say to them as a group. So he invited the 40 to 50 people to take an hour or so by themselves and simply ask God if there was anything He wanted to say to this team. When they returned, there were about a dozen people who shared their thoughts. All but one brought up the topic of unity. God now had their attention. Because this group asked together, they heard together. It was a great confirmation to all of them that God had given them some very specific direction. They were ready to listen. As the Lord leads us in times of Spirit directed corporate prayer and worship, He will often direct us to a theme. Then, as we read and pray from Scriptures and sing songs on that theme, He is able to bring conviction to one person, hope to another, and direction to another. Once I was leading a prayer retreat with more than 150 men from one congregation who were together from Thursday evening through Sunday. We did not have workshops or special speakers. We simply prayed. At the last session I asked people to share in a word or short phrase what they had experienced in those days together. Words like *rest, refreshment, direction, unity, and heart surgery* were mentioned. Then one man said, "The best marriage seminar I have ever been to!" I remember thinking, *Marriage seminar? I know we didn't talk about marriage and I am not sure we even prayed very much about it.* But we had worshiped enough to establish an environment for God (the best marriage counselor ever!) to tap this brother on the shoulder and speak to him about how He wanted him to treat his wife. Recently, as I wrapped up a one-day time of prayer with pastors, I asked a similar question. One man said, "I came here wanting some clear direction from the Lord and He gave it to me as *you*—" he pointed to another man in the group "prayed." Even though the pray-er was not even praying for the man who was speaking, God used him to communicate exactly what was needed.

On Behalf of a City

There have been many cities in our country that have been hit hard with unusual weather-related catastrophes in recent years. I know that pastors have had ongoing, meaningful, corporate prayer times in several of these cities. Without exception, when the catastrophe hit, they teamed together to serve their cities in very effective ways. One factor in their effectiveness is the trusting, noncompetitive relationships they have developed over the years through prayer. A second factor is the love and vision they have developed for their cities. As they were together interceding for their communities, God put fresh vision and desire in them to love the people around them through service. When the need was there, they rose up as one church to meet it head on. For example, in February of 2010, after several prayer summits for Rhode Island pastors, many of them wanted to take concrete steps to have a greater impact in their state. About 70 pastors were presented with the idea of forming the Love RI partnership. Pastors were given six weeks to decide, and by the end of March, 30 congregations decided they wanted to be involved. Initially, the plan was to start with a pulpit exchange in June with a city outreach in the fall. However, before the initial April meeting could happen, the heavens were opened and much of the state was hit with a "100-year" flood! At the first Love RI meeting, instead of talking about it, they began to do it. An official partnership with Samaritan's Purse was formed on the spot. Within one week's time 385 volunteers from 15 congregations were at work at various sites. Often the volunteers didn't even know each other, but quickly got acquainted through partnering in the work. There was often an opening to pray for people in their homes. Since then, other less spontaneous (and less drastic) activities have

continued to mark the result of corporate prayer in Rhode Island. In biblical times, throughout history, and even today, as people have prayed together—in congregations and cities—the consistent results have been a greater depth of relationship and a greater sense of mission among those who practice corporate prayer. Inevitably, they have offered greater impact in the name of Christ when they have been united in prayer and ignited by the Spirit.

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This article is adapted from his book *United and Ignited: Encountering God through Dynamic Corporate Prayer*.