

## Praying with others

### Sandy Fairservice

A drought lies over Africa. The people are desperate. Some are praying to Mohammed, others sacrificing blood to their gods. A new Christian comes to the missionary and suggests the believers pray for rain because Elijah did and it rained. The missionary is nonplussed, but agrees. The drums beat out the message, 'Now we will see who has the God that lives. The believers are going to pray for rain.' The next, hot, dry evening, the Christians gather in the corrugated iron church wearing umbrella hats, for the rain. 'Lord, we need rain,' they pray. Twenty-five minutes later, the first drops of rain hit the metal roof, the beginning of a drought-breaking downpour. Many come to Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Communal prayer has been a feature of Christendom from the days of the apostles, even before the arrival of the Holy Spirit! New Testament teaching about group prayer, however, is remarkably light. A lot of what Christians believe and do today is based on the book of Acts, which is a wonderful history of how the Holy Spirit thrust the gospel into the world. However, Luke's account of the events along the way, such as praying together, or baptism, should be considered in relation to the teaching of apostles.<sup>2</sup> The apostles derived their doctrine from the Lord Jesus Christ, from their long association with him, his later instruction after his resurrection, and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit. Concerning prayer, when the disciples observed Jesus praying, they asked him to teach them to pray. He responded by giving them a framework (Matthew 6:5-14), instructing them to do it "in secret", in contrast to the ostentation of the Pharisees. Jim Chew says that what Jesus is teaching is whether you pray individually or with others there are certain things you have to close your mind to, one of them being seen by others. You can "enter your room" in a busy street, or on a golf course. We focus on God, realising who he is. We are conscious that we are part of a community as we open, "Our Father."

Another instance sometimes used to teach about praying with others is Jesus' prayer time with his disciples in Gethsemane. However, a close look at these passages shows that Jesus did all the talking, and prayed alone for part of the time.<sup>3</sup>

Still with Jesus and the apostles, we come to Matthew 18:19, 20 in which Jesus is quoted as saying: "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. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." All the books and articles I have read over many years that urge us to pray together use this verse for their proof text. It is often used to "summon" the presence of Christ to a prayer meeting without regard to the need for heart-agreement among the praying people. The context, however, is how to deal with sin in the church fellowship. The discipline administered by those concerned is said to represent the will of God as exacted by the presence of Christ. Commentators disagree about this passage<sup>4</sup>, as do individual Christians. Finally, the many books on prayer<sup>5</sup> take the rest of the New Testament's teaching about praying and apply it to personal piety.

So why do Christians pray together? The best explanation is that they can't help it! The church is made up of individuals who, thanks to the redeeming work of Christ and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, comprise a supernatural organism called by Paul "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12). The great Paul himself recognised he was part of the body of Christ, consulting the Jerusalem church on his understanding of the gospel, calling home churches together to hear reports, and asking each and every believer to pray for him and the advance of the gospel. As part of this organism we talk individually with our heavenly Father, and with one another. At times, we gather and talk to him together. These were activities that Paul encouraged. Although you can read Paul's

instructions as applying either to individuals or groups, several passages stand out for me as talking specifically about gathering for prayer. He encouraged the believers at Colossae to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly as they sang Psalms and hymns together and talked together, and praised God (one facet of praying) together (Colossians 3:16). A second clear passage for me is the one in which he instructs Timothy about the ordering of church life at Ephesus (1 Timothy 2). Taken in this wider context, and with the intent of Jesus' prayer in John 17, that we might all be one, we conclude that many of Paul's instructions concern praying together. (At one time Paul and Silas were praying together and praising God together in jail.)

Crises bring believers together. A few years ago I was part of a three-family commitment to pray about an ongoing crisis, and we met almost every week for most of the year, with the Lrd so far granting about half our requests. It was a natural grouping that became a close, caring community, sharing frankly, sincerely, and praying with passion. It was hard work. Praying together is hard work at times and, in my view, not always a good place for a new Christian.

Our group was never bigger than six, but it has become a belief that the more people praying, the greater the effect. Paul's prayer requests to the churches (such as in Romans 15:30) are reflected today in the avalanche of printed prayer lists, faxes, emails and phone calls soliciting greater numbers to pray. But does God play it by the numbers, like a sensitive politician? A theologically-conservative friend of mine says the church is influenced today by the surrounding cultural sea, of which a major component is pantheism, in which it is believed that the spirit world can be manipulated in a mechanistic way through the use of ritual.

Historically, it is true that when large numbers of people have united in prayer over an issue, such as the evangelisation of a region or a group of people, God has answered generously. Last year a call went out globally for Christians to pray for the generally-resistant Muslim world. Those ten million who prayed did so corporately and individually, with mass electronic and printed communications providing the links. Months later, insiders said that a "phenomenal" surge of interest had taken place.<sup>6</sup>

So are ten million better than 100,000? Is more power generated by the numbers of people praying? I don't believe God plays this numbers game. It is not the group that has the power, it is their faith in a powerful, risen Christ that changes lives and advances his kingdom. God delights to answer prayer, but what matters to him is the individual's sincerity and their relationship with him at the time. The hands that are raised in the group must be individually holy (1 Timothy 2:8). Such ordinary, sincere and righteous persons may then loose the power of God and bring about great change (James 5:16).

From my experience, here are five benefits of praying with others:

- \* Faithfulness and perseverance is encouraged.
- \* The communication of needs and God's answers is enabled.
- \* Unity is promoted.
- \* Support and encouragement is provided.
- \* Blessing is shared.

References:

1. The missionary was Tommie Titcome. The story is related in *When You Pray* by Harold Lindsell (Baker).

2. How to interpret historical precedent is addressed in *How to Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Chapter Six).
3. Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-45; John 17:1-18:1.
4. Supporting corporate prayer: Walvoord and Zuck, *Matthew Henry*. Not supporting it: Barker and Kohlenberger: “These two verses should not in this setting be taken as a promise regarding any prayer on which two or three believers agree. Scripture is rich in prayer promises (21:22; Jn 14:13-14; 15:7-8, 16); but if this passage deals with prayer at all, it is restricted by the phrase ‘about anything’ (lit., ‘about any judicial matter’).”
5. Some of the authors: Bounds, Chambers, Duewel, Eastman, Eims, Foster, Finney, Lindsell, Myers, Whitney. An exception is Brase who majors on corporate prayer. Asians are said to lead in group praying, but their writings are not generally available in English.
6. Source: German, Swiss, Austrian and other Evangelical Alliances. Information distributed by the Centre for Mission Direction, Christchurch.