

Prayer and the Ministry of the Word

By Dr. David Jones
Professor of Theology and Ethics,
Covenant Theological Seminary

This article is an adaptation of a sermon delivered in a Covenant Seminary chapel service last semester by Dr. David Jones. The passage from which he preached, Acts 6:1-7, refers to the important responsibility of church teachers to lead their congregations in both preaching and prayer. However, the principles contained in this message can be applied beyond the pulpit as ruling elders, discipleship leaders, Sunday school teachers, spouses, parents, grandparents and others carry out their responsibilities wherever God calls His people to lead others in His Word and prayer.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ...So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. ACTS 6:1-7

"So the word of God spread..." Instead of focusing on external opposition and internal tension in this passage, Luke chooses to focus on the triumph of the Word. The growing Word creates a growing church. And a growing church sometimes, maybe always, creates tension. Happy is the church whose tensions are due to growth rather than decline.

Acts begins with 120 disciples gathered for prayer and supplication. The Holy Spirit fell upon them that day, and at the end of the day of Pentecost there were 3,120 disciples. By chapter five, the disciples are too numerous to count. The twelve apostles cannot possibly be on top of everything, and in Acts 6 the disciples call a congregational meeting and assign a division of responsibility.

The disciples divide the labor, but there is a limit set to the division of responsibility. Notice the apostles say, "Choose men to take care of the administrative responsibility and we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Prayer and the ministry of the Word are not divided. They are seen here by the Apostles as something to be connected. What is the relation of prayer to the ministry of the Word in the church today?

Generally, we think of the connection of the Word and prayer in relation to our church leaders' devotional lives. Indeed, leaders should have strong personal prayer lives in order to preach the Word. And certainly I agree preaching must be founded in prayer. Teaching the Word of God in whatever form ought to flow from a deep-seated personal walk with the Lord. But as one examines this passage in the book of Acts, "the prayer" seems to refer to more of the public responsibility of the apostles' ministry.

Leading in Prayer

Acts begins with a prayer meeting, and it continues to record public prayer all the way through. Acts 6:4, considered in the whole context of Acts (see especially 2:42), points us to the significance of the public role of leading God's people in prayer. I think the connection between prayer and the Word of God here has to do with leading God's people in prayer.

Spiritual leaders know it is their role to lead by communicating God's Word, but they must be careful not to forget the equally important role of leading God's people in prayer. That does not mean that the leaders or the pastors do all the praying for their charges or congregation, but it does mean that leading others in prayer has important ramifications. Just as we need to cultivate the skills of communication and interpretation of God's Word, so I think that we need to cultivate the public responsibility of leadership in the church for congregational prayer life. It is a solemn burden to lead God's people in prayer, to lead them to the throne of grace, and to lead them in the development of their own prayer lives. It is a responsibility which must not be neglected.

What is Prayer?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will." The disciples came to Jesus saying, "Lord teach us to pray as John taught his disciples," (Matt. 11:1). In response, Jesus teaches them the "Disciple's Prayer." We call it the "Lord's Prayer," but it is actually a prayer to teach the disciples to pray, because it forms the desires that they are to bring to God.

The Lord's Prayer shows us what we ought to desire in order that we may bring those desires before God in prayer. It begins, as you know, with the hallowing of God's name, the coming of His kingdom, that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and it continues "...give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Praying for Authorities

The fullness we see in the Lord's prayer is too often missing from our congregational prayer life, and that is partly due to a lack of leadership of the congregation in prayer. Typically, congregational prayer in the church today is preoccupied with local and individual needs. Offering up local needs is not wrong, but in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 the Apostle Paul writes, "First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." Paul sets the priorities. First of all, prayer is to be made for all men, especially for kings and all those who are in authority! Paul sees the positive role of government in providing the background for the work of evangelism and the building up of the saints. Local and individual needs are important, but we need to think about how the Lord calls His Church to pray.

We must provide leadership to our congregations in prayer. One of the distinctives of the evangelical movement has always been its emphasis on prayer. But as we review the practice of prayer in the evangelical church, we often see a void when it comes to intercession for the world around us.

Jeremiah 29:7 tells us, “Seek the peace (seek the shalom) of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray unto the Lord for it. For in its peace, you shall have peace.” Jeremiah is not talking here about seeking the peace of God’s city—of Jerusalem. He is talking to people in captivity in a pagan land. Yet he tells the people to seek the peace, the flourishing, the welfare of the city where God has placed them. God calls us to seek the welfare of the nation in which God has placed us. That is the ministry of intercession that is to coordinate with the ministry of reconciliation. How often do we fall short of the concerns we see prayed for in the book of Acts? Those early Christians were not primarily preoccupied with local, individual, physical and material needs.

I thought I found a wonderful illustration for this point when visiting my home state of South Carolina. I am interested in South Carolina history, and the books I read almost always mention James Pettigrew, the last Unionist in South Carolina. A story which has been told about him since the late 19th century, relates his faithful attendance of St. Michael’s Episcopal Church. However, one Sunday when the pastor skipped over the prayer for the President of the United States, James Pettigrew got up out of his pew and walked out of the church.

The story got around that he left because the pastor skipped the prayer for the President of the United States. Upon further research I found out that his son-in-law said he simply left the church because he had to cough. But even though the story turned out to be inaccurate, its plausibility demonstrates a graphic point about the congregational prayers of that time. If the prayer for the President of the United States were omitted in one of our churches today, we would never notice. We do notice when he is prayed for!

We need to think carefully about how to lead our congregations in prayer, because how they are led affects how they pray. Small group Bible studies typically conclude with a time of prayer together, but our congregants often do not know how to pray for the nation because they have not heard this modeled. They have not been led to pray for the nation.

One model of how to pray for those in office can be found in *Pray for Joy*, a collection of prayers by Lutheran seminary professor Martin Franzmann. The prayer, written in the turbulent 1960s, is called “For Charity Toward Men in Office”

*Almighty God,
You have ordained the authorities that are;
You have clothed them in a majesty
that is higher and stronger
than the given facts of their history,
a majesty that awakens fear in us
and claims honor from us.
O God, remember in Your mercy
the men who bear the burden of this majesty,
men like us easily bent
by the pressure of temptation,
by the impact of expediency.
Remember them and strengthen them
when they are moved
to shade the truth to their own ends,
to withhold what should be told,*

to distort what must be told,
to disclose what does not serve
our common weal.
Keep intact their honor and their
credibility.
Purge us, O God,
of cynical distrust,
of party passion,
of the deafness
of our rebellious bent. ...
Your Son, our Lord,
would not speak ill of Caesar
even when Caesar's power
nailed Him to the cross.
Give us the Spirit of Your Son. ¹

As we look at the situation in our nation, it is clear that those in authority have a great need for our prayers. Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to His will. Leading the congregation in prayer, according to the principles of the Lord's Prayer and according to the priorities of God's Word, is a form of discipleship. I am not saying that prayer is a means to discipleship, but that how public prayer is conducted is inevitably a formative influence for the congregation.

More time is spent preparing sermons than our prayers, but neither can stand alone. After the Apostles' model, God calls leaders to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. Leadership in the church is an inseparable coordination of prayer and preaching, with thankful acknowledgement of God's mercies, always in dependence upon His grace.

¹From: *Pray for Joy*. Copyright 1970, Concordia Publishing House. Used with permission.

This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request by e-mailing covenant@covenantseminary.edu. Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp.

© 2003 Covenant Theological Seminary.



Rooted in Grace for a Lifetime of Ministry

12330 Conway Road, St. Louis, Mo., 63141 314-434-4044 www.covenantseminary.edu
National Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America