# Theology  

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## Balancing Praying with Doing

Russell H. BOWERS, Jr.

Christians sometimes say, "If only we would pray, God would change our world." "Prayer-meeting is the most important meeting of the week-the 'Hour of Power'." "Satan doesn't care what else we do, as long as we don't pray." All this implies that our talking to God outweighs God's talking to us (as we scrutinize the scriptures). It throws back into God's lap responsibilities he has assigned us. And it leads to a flurry of prayer and fasting vigils, seminars, and conferences.

Certainly prayer is essential. God does meet with us when we call on him. His Spirit aids our praying, unmasks our sins, breaks our pride, and draws us to Christ. God does answer prayer, and "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." But some people speak as if prayer were the whole of our responsibilityas if all we need do is pray and wait. That is wrong. Though prayer is $a$ key to God's blessing, it is not the only key. Another is informed obedience.

Some people balk at that. Obedience sounds so pedestrian next to prayer. Isn't obedience a human work? Would not our efforts detract from the supernaturalness of revival? Would not God's glory
be dimmed if human contributions played a part? Are we talking synergism here?

So we bristle with Naaman and mutter, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of Yahweh his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me. . . " Naaman nearly forfeited his cure because he wanted to wait and watch God work, rather than participate by plunging into the Jordan. How we crave the passive (on our part) and the spectacular (on God's)!

But although there were times when God's people were to watch and do nothing (ask Jehoshaphat), there were others when God said, "Stop praying and start doing." This is the message we need today.

## Times to Stop Praying and Start Acting

Joshua was leading Israel into Canaan. The nation had defeated Jericho, but lost at Ai. Israel's panicked leaders fell prostrate and prayed. Nothing wrong with that, but what did God say? "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face?" In brief God said, "Stop praying. Start acting. You have disobeyed. Correct the problem." Had Joshua insisted on continuing to pray when God said to do, Israel would have lost again. Do we ever substitute prayer for our nation or churches when there is obvious practical work that we should do?

Judah in Isaiah's day longed for revival. The nation prayed for it, but nothing happened. They wondered why.
[D]ay after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.
'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it'?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

They prayed, but no revival followed. When they asked why, God told Isaiah to denounce their sin. If they would rise from their knees and obey him in their everyday relationships and responsibilities, God would answer. They needed to loose the chains of injustice, share their food with the hungry, do away with malicious talk, etc. These may not sound as "spiritual" as prayer vigils and fasts. They have to do with human actions and human relationships, not spectacular divine displays. But these, and not prayer, were the keys which would unlock revival:

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear.
You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.
Blessing for Judah would follow obedience, not more prayer and fasting.

We resist such counsel at our own peril. "Hear the word of Yahweh, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship Yahweh. This is what Yahweh Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place." (Notice that God does not say, "Start a 24 -hour prayer vigil," or "Go on a prolonged fast." He doesn't say, "Start praying to me," but "Start doing right to people.") "Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is.the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh!' If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, . . . then I will let you live in this place. . . . But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless." These deceptive words suggested that Judah need not obey, but should instead continue to "worship." Unfortunately Judah ignored Jeremiah, and God sent Nebuchadnezzar to end their empty temple prayer meetings.

## Attempting to Give Back to God The Work He Gave Us

Does the same thing happen today? Do we ever pray when God tells us to act? Has any church ever tried to return to God the
responsibilities he has assigned to us? This, I suppose, would be the ultimate in "upward delegation."

For example, God commands us to evangelize. We invert that command and pray that he would do it-that he would somehow "open the hearts" of our neighbors while we say nothing to them. Perhaps we erect a church sign to inform passing sinners when we meet, but then fail to think up ways to creatively introduce them to Christ. There is nothing wrong with pleading for God's aid in our evangelism, but only if we plan to participate in the process. Or we "fulfill" our responsibilities to the sick and elderly by praying that God would comfort them, but ourselves neither call nor offer a meal. We pray that God would correct our nation's moral problems, yet write no protesting letters and watch the same videos as everybody else. We are commissioned to reach the world with the gospel, yet some churches tend to keep to themselves. God urges us to value our families and people and we chase things. Yet we pray for revival. What's wrong with this picture?

## Why Some People Prefer "Praying"

Why do we prefer prayer to action? One reason may be laziness. It is simply easier to open our mouths in windy prayer than to expend our lives in costly obedience. Actually building a house for a poor person is sweatier than praying that God house the needy. Finding out how best we can serve our neighbors, and then doing things for them that will open them to the gospel, exhausts us more profoundly than merely requesting that God speak to them, and then blindly plowing ahead with our Same Old Thing. Work is messier, too. When we struggle with people we make mistakes. We do things wrong, blunder up blind alleys, lose our patience, and drop the ball. We find ourselves needing to apologize and start over. We face criticism and ridicule. How much less traumatic and error-prone to instead intone orthodox prayers from our church buildings. We prefer prayer to obedience because of the toil of obedience.

A warning-good praying is also strenuous. Epaphras wrestled in prayer, and thus worked hard for the Asian churches. But while Epaphras worked hard at prayer he was surrounded by
those who worked hard at the work. The early church did not deceive itself into thinking prayer alone was the answer.

A second reason we prefer prayer to action is selfishness. Selfishness'means I pursue my perceived best interest. Christianity, the church, people, and ultimately God, all exist to fulfill and make me comfortable. And while, in Christian charity, I am willing to pray that God bless others, I cannot reasonably be expected to sacrifice myself to help bring that blessing about. Prayer is cheaper; obedience costs too much.

Third, perhaps an inadequate loathing of sin blunts our urgency to obey God. We reduce sin to a theological concept-the reason why Christ came-and quote verses on its nature and consequences. Sin becomes only an abstract idea, not a concrete choice and terrible habit. But to God sin is not a tome on our theological shelves. It is a stench, and stirs his wrath and judgment. And while through the blood of Christ God forgives sin, we must learn to loath it, fear it, and run the other way. The church cannot dawdle in iniquity-either wrong things we do or right things we don't—and expect God to bless simply because we ask him to. If revival is what we want, certainly we will plead for it. But we will also in fear and faith obey the God who grants it.

A fourth reason we prefer prayer to action is that some people don't understand how important are the things we do. They think that if humans contribute to a ministry, it will detract from the glory of God in the fruit it bears. But that is not true. Rather than "Get out of the way and let God work," we must learn to "Get on board and do what God is doing." Paul did not think it was either God or us-he meant it when he called his team "God's fellow workers."

## God Uses People

Certainly God is not limited to using humans when he wants to do something. We served as neither consultants nor engineers when he made the world. God is sovereign; he is free to work when and how he chooses. But frequently and meaningfully God nevertheless does use people to accomplish his will.

Christians understand that the Bible is the word of God. The whole was breathed out by God. And while that is true, there is not a word of it that did not pass through the mind and flow from the pen of a man as well. Paul (not God) was the one who was on the verge of wishing himself cursed and cut off from Christ; Jude the person who was eager to write about salvation but felt compelled to address a different matter; Luke the individual who thought it good to write a gospel account, and so researched and composed it. The Bible is one hundred percent the word of God, but it is simultaneously one hundred percent the word of man. When God determined that humanity should have a written record of his will, he did not supernaturally float it down from the skies. Human beings struggled $\ldots$. and thought . . . and wrote . . . and sometimes rewrote. Through the centuries God has preserved that word as people copied, hid, carried, and translated it. Though he does not need to, God often accomplishes his work through people.

The humanity of Jesus is as essential to evangelical Christology as is his deity. Jesus was a man. We must remember that "the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man . . . there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus . . . he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. . . ." God's salvation was not diluted by his using the man Jesus of Nazareth to accomplish it. On the contrary, salvation would have been impossible had that man not participated. Like the written word, the incarnate word is one hundred percent divine and one hundred percent human. Being human Christ could say, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." Eternal salvation is the work of God. But because Jesus is the savior it is also the work of a man-one who was like us in every way. God's glory is not diminished when he uses people-and their obedience and sacrifices-to accomplish his plan.

## Who Builds the Church?

By what means does the church grow today? Jesus said, " $I$ will build my church." The book of Acts begins: "In my former book, Theolophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. . . ." This implies that Acts records what Jesus continued to do and to teach. But how does Jesus build his church? How does he continue to do and teach? Through people. Acts records some of their sailings . . . struggles . . . sermons . . . and sufferings. Paul told the Colossians, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church. . . . I want you to know how much I am struggling for you. . . ." Acts says that Christ was building the Colossian church. Colossians says that Paul was building the Colossian church. How do these two fit together? Christ was building the church through Paul. God does his work through people. And Christ builds his church today as people obey him-choose not to get out of his way, but rather get on board and do what he is doing. No church is built without the evangelism, teaching, giving, serving, and labor of people . . . as they are motivated and empowered by the spirit of God. The church grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work, not as each part sits and waits for God to do his work. It is simultaneously the work of God and people.

The same with revival. Sure we need to pray for it. But we also need to work for it. Our work does not detract from God's work, or diminish his glory when the answer comes. God often does his work through people. So we need more calls for the church to quit the monastery and obey God in the marketplace. When we are busy practicing daily righteousness

Then [our] light will break forth like the dawn, and [our] healing will quickly appear. . . .
[We] will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.
Pentecost is not going to be repeated; there is no need to pray for that to happen. The church already stands "clothed with power from on high." We need more calls to take the tasks we have been given and fulfill them in the strength God provides.

## What Does God Want?

Christianity is not that complicated. Does the Almighty crave our self-denying ritual? The prophet ponders that question:

With what shall I come before Yahweh and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does Yahweh require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
Micah's conclusion is simple. God does not seek our prolonged prayers or extended fasts. He is not as impressed with showy display as he is with daily obedience. Similarly, the answer to the psalmist's question, "Yahweh, who may dwell in your sanctuary?" doesn't mention religious ritual, but instead discusses practical, daily righteousness. When people asked John the Baptist, "What should we do?" he answered mundanely: "Donate your excess, act honestly, be content." Nothing spectacular or "religious" here. Yet God would bless if people obeyed.

How often do we say, "I'll pray for you," when what we need to say is, "Let me help you"? Prayer is not the end of our responsibility but the beginning: it opens the door for God to direct and strengthen us for our tasks. However one may assess her theology, Mother Theresa did more through her deeds to make Christianity and Christ respectable in non-Christian India than do the genuflections of thousands who may think more biblically but who do nothing. "Dear children, let us not love"-or seek revival, or attempt to win the lost-"with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Doubtless our nation needs God's hand upon us. Certainly we should pray for that. But no less surely we need to be doing what God has commanded. We need to rise from our knees and go with
our feet, help with our hands, speak with our tongues, and embrace with our arms. Prayer is $a$ key to revival, but so is obedience. God answers, but he often answers through people. Perhaps his answer will include us. May we not be guilty of sitting and sighing, "I wish God would do something," while all the time ignoring the God who says, "I wish you would do something."

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