

For All the Saints...
Praying for the church

by J. Ed Eubanks, Jr.

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Author's Preface

"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

—Romans 12:3

I am humbled by this book.

I recently heard Sinclair Ferguson comment on an event that happened early in his ministry: as an adult in his thirties, he was approached by a major British publisher and asked to write a book on prayer. Ferguson said that in his youth, he was yet just mature enough to respond to that publisher: "I'm far to inexperienced and immature to ably write a book on prayer. Perhaps you should ask a man of more experience and maturity." When he offered suggestions as to whom they might appeal, several times they responded, "we must confess you were not our first choice; we've already asked Mr. *So-and-so*, and he turned us down, saying that he wasn't nearly wise and mature enough to write a book on prayer!"

I empathize with Dr. Ferguson, because I also feel far too inexperienced, immature, and lacking in wisdom to pen an article — much less a book— on the subject of prayer. Indeed, I would not have dared to undertake it, but for the request of my congregation: the women of the congregation I serve asked me to help them find some resources for learning to better pray for the church. I looked and found nothing. They then asked that I might present them with something— anything— to guide them in

learning to pray for the church. How could I refuse? So I set out to write a one-page summary, and that became a pamphlet, which grew into a booklet, and eventually a small book.

Not long after I had completed this book, I was asked to lead my presbytery in prayer; it was the second time in less than two years that I had been asked to do so. When I got home, I told Marcie (in a bit of minor panic): “They’ve asked me to lead in prayer twice, and I’ve done this book on prayer. What if people get the misimpression that I really do know something about prayer!?”

I still feel that way; far from an expert on prayer, I feel as though I am only beginning to learn to pray myself. I am a poor example of prayer, and very little of what I know about prayer (which itself is very little) is put into practice.

But I am comforted that there is hope for me yet. And perhaps you, too, might likewise be comforted. Prayer is not beyond our reach, and the simplest and most meager of prayers are taken up by our Savior and perfected, then presented to the Father as righteous intercessions.

The truths presented here, I hope, are not ideas of mine— for that would serve you abysmally. Rather, I trust you will find them to be truths rooted in Scripture, and in the teachings of men far wiser and more experienced than I.

Introduction

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

—Ephesians 6:18

We must pray. Whether it be in public and in concert with other believers, or privately (perhaps even silently), we pray. Whether it be long and complete, or even as short as, “Oh, God!”— we pray. Even when we lack the words, our hearts and minds offer wordless utterances before the Lord.

And we must pray for the church. While this is not nearly so self-evident as our basic need to pray, it is nevertheless as important. As no Christian has his or her true identity apart from God (therefore we unite ourselves to Him in prayer), so no Christian has his or her true identity as a Christian apart from His Body. St. Augustine said, “He who does not have the church as his mother does not have God as his Father.”¹ Therefore, we both unite ourselves to one another, and to our Savior, in praying for Christ’s church.

How do we pray for Christ’s church? While there are always particular circumstances in a local congregation, a denomination, or even in the worldwide church that demand specific prayers, there are also some aspects of prayer for the church that we may,

¹ Saint Augustine. Quotes.net, STANDS4 LLC, 2009. <http://www.quotes.net/quote/10282>, accessed March 4, 2009.

and should, always pray for. If we learn to pray for these matters, we will never lack for a subject of prayer. Learning these types of prayers is the focus of this small book.

How do we learn to pray for Christ's church? From the church, of course. And here is our first encouragement: Christ's church spans all the way back to Adam, Eve, and the promise of the Seed of the woman;² it includes all of our spiritual ancestors in Old Testament Israel; and continues through the life of Christ and through the New Testament church. It also includes 2000 years— and counting— of church history, and all that history might teach us.

So, we'll begin in Scripture. If our prayers do not have a biblical basis, we must question whether they are worth our time, for they may very well be out of accord with the will of God! Even in wrong prayers, of course, God may change our hearts and draw us nearer to Him and to His will; still, grounding our prayers in Scripture is both helpful and prudent.

On the main, the rest of this book is divided into sections, with each section representing a particular "aspect" of prayer—that is, something in particular that we might pray for the church. In each section, you'll find that there are three parts that follow a few introductory paragraphs; these parts are distinguished in the sections, but it may be helpful if I describe them here:

- ◆ **BIBLICAL BASIS OF PRAYER**— the verse(s) that give us the basis for this particular aspect of our prayers, plus a brief explanation of what these verses teach us about prayer.
- ◆ **FOUNDATIONS OF PRAYER**— the "big idea" of this aspect of our prayers. What exactly are we praying for when we pray for this aspect of Christ's church? This part of each section has several facets itself: how to pray for your local

² Genesis 3:15 "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

congregation, how to pray for your congregation's leadership, and how to pray for the universal church.

- ◆ **PRAYER SUMMARY**— you may wish to begin regularly praying for the subjects of this book; I hope you do! At the end of each section, I have offered a summary of the more specific parts of each aspect covered in the section, so that you will have a reference for use during prayer.

At the end of the book, there is a brief list of recommended reading. These are books that I have found to be helpful as I have increasingly learned how to pray, and how Scripture urges us as believers to pray. While by no means exhaustive, this list will nevertheless keep even an avid reader occupied.

It is our delight and privilege to come before the Lord in prayer, and I am grateful to God for this opportunity to learn with you how we might pray for Christ's church!

Praying for God's Glory

"One of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'

He said to them, 'When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name..."'"

—Luke 11:1-2

We are taught by Christ Himself to pray for the glory of God. The word "hallowed" means "greatly revered or respected," and the Greek word in Luke 11:2 means "to sanctify," which is to set apart for a holy purpose.

All of mankind was created for God's glory;³ we were built to be worshipers, and in our creation God was the object of our worship. In our fallenness, we frequently fail to fulfill this purpose, instead turning frequently to the idols of our hearts— so much so, that the reformer John Calvin commented that, "man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."⁴

Nevertheless, God's glory is due Him in our worship, both individually and corporately. It is what we were built for; consequently, this is the proper beginning-point for a consideration of how we might pray for the church.

³ The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* begins with the question, "What is the chief end of man?" and the answer is, "man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.11.8.

BIBLICAL BASIS

God's glory is a prominent theme throughout the Scriptures, and therefore it ought to be a prominent theme in all of our prayers.⁵ The Bible gives us examples of God's leaders (and Jesus Himself) praying: that God would be glorified in the worship and work of individuals and of God's people; that God's glory would be revealed to those who do not believe as a basis for them to come into belief; that the prominence of God's grace and mercy might increase as the world's awareness of His glory increases.

The idolatry of God's people, their tendency toward legalism, and their inclination toward formalism instead of true worship is also a prominent theme throughout the Bible: from the golden calves that the Israelites brought from Egypt, to the frequent abandonment of temple worship, to the formalism so frequently checked and challenged by the prophets, to the cleansing of the temple by Jesus, false worship and giving glory to worldly things is nothing new to Christianity (though it continues to be our constant struggle). It is clear why this must be an area of devoted and fervent prayer.

FOUNDATIONS OF PRAYER

Therefore, among the first things we ought to pray for the church is for God's glory to be prominently displayed through the church. God's people are, first and foremost, worshipers— we are called and established by Him to bring glory to Him through our worship, both individually and corporately. Toward that end, God's church is called four things in the Scriptures:

His Body: if we, the church, are the very embodiment of God in this world, then we ought to reflect Him mostly, and ourselves very little. As John the Baptist said, "He

⁵ Psalm 34:3 "Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together." (CF: Daniel 4:37; John 12:28; John 17:1, 5; Romans 15:5-6.)

must become greater; I must become less.”⁶ We, also, must become less.

His Family: families have a tendency to either bring prominence to a family name, or shame. So it is with the church. We must pray that God’s family would “conduct [ourselves] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,”⁷ and in so doing live up to the family name.

His Bride: as the Bride of Christ, we are being prepared for His glory: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”⁸

His Army: an army protects the honor and integrity of that which it defends. We are to “put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light”⁹ so that we, the church, might bring glory to God.

We should pray that God would exalt His church in the ways that she reflects His glory, and humble her in the ways that she glorifies herself instead of Him. Locally, this may mean that He allow certain efforts or activities of a church to fade away, if they no longer serve the purposes of advancing God’s glory. It certainly means that His name would be praised and proclaimed boldly in times of corporate worship. It may also mean that the ministries of the church might be kept and held loosely by the members, allowing for change and growth as God perfects the efforts of His people, and as they decrease and He increases.

⁶ John 3:30 “He must become greater; I must become less.”

⁷ Philippians 1:27 “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel”

⁸ Revelation 19:7 “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”

⁹ Romans 13:12 “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

On a broader scale, praying for God's glory in His church may lead us to pray for the efforts of church planting and revitalization by presbyteries, denominations, and other bodies, so that God's Kingdom would continue to advance His glory and truth. Or it might require that we pray for those portions of the church to decline that have turned aside from His glory in favor of worldliness or abandoning orthodoxy.

PRAYER SUMMARY

- ◆ That God's glory would increase, and the glory of man would decrease.
- ◆ That God would sanctify us, His children, in order to bring glory to Himself through His Body.
- ◆ For the preparation of Jesus' Bride for her glorious union with Him at His return, through which His glory would be increasingly evident.
- ◆ That the servants of God would be empowered to bring glory to God, even in the face of opposition.
- ◆ That our hearts would be devoted to God in worship, individually and corporately.
- ◆ For the glory of the Lord to be clearly displayed before all the world, that the world would see that He is King of kings and Lord of lords.
- ◆ That the ministries of the Church would bring glory to Him; that those that bring Him glory would prosper, and those that do not would fade away.
- ◆ For the Kingdom of God to be advanced through an awareness of God's glory, and for the sake of God's glory.

Praying for Unity in the Church

“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

—John 17:22-23

One of the most frequent teachings that Christ offered to His disciples is that they be united together. In fact, Jesus and the apostles make it clear that the primary way that the world will know that the Gospel of Christ is true will be through our unity and love for one another.¹⁰

The division, lack of acceptance, and unloving spirit that dominates the church today flies in the face of this— it should not be difficult to understand why so much of the world has easily dismissed the church’s message as irrelevant and suspect. We should therefore make praying for the unity of the church one of our most frequent concerns in prayer.

BIBLICAL BASIS

Scripture frequently shows us pictures of unity in the face of diversity and even disagreement. Old Testament Israel was itself a unity of diversity, with 12 distinct families (though all distant cousins) bound together in one nation. As Jesus gathered His 12 disciples— who would become His apostles— He called men who

¹⁰ See also the section on “Praying for the Fellowship of the Saints” for more on this topic.

would be hated enemies in any other context to unite.¹¹ Even as these apostles disagreed during the establishment of the early church, they sought loving, gracious unity with one another rather than divide.

Since then, the church of Christ has increasingly displayed disunity and brokenness to the world. After centuries of a united, single world church came the division of the church into eastern and western, then increasing division in Europe. By the time of the settling of the Americas, the divided church was the norm. Today, we casually accept the fact of thousands of protestant denominations, often separated for petty or even forgotten reasons.

FOUNDATIONS OF PRAYER

When we pray for unity, we must first look in the mirror: what must I pray for regarding my own failure to strive for unity with my brothers and sisters in Christ? How have I made it difficult for others to feel and be united with me? How ought my union with Christ change my attitude, actions, and heart toward others?

Because of our pride and tendency to accuse, it is often dangerous to pray these same things specifically for others in our local congregation; too often we judge and chastise them in our hearts, regardless of whether our assumptions are well-founded. Therefore, we must be careful when we pray for others about unity; perhaps we might usually pray more generally for them, that Christ would continue to bring growth, humility, and a spirit of unity within them.

¹¹ Matthew 10:2-4 “These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.” Zealots, such as Simon, were sworn enemies of those who were sympathetic to the Roman powers, such as Matthew the tax collector.

As we pray for the church's unity, we might also focus on how we often give undue priority to minor issues, while failing to allow major agreements to be places where we unite. Be it an individual of one tradition rejecting one of another tradition; one local congregation comparing itself to another; or division based on broad theological or denominational boundaries, the history of the church shows we separate more than we unite.

Therefore, we should pray that our hearts, and the hearts of believers everywhere, would be broken about our disunity. We should pray that Christ would give us a capacity for love that would overcome minor distinctions and disagreements. We should pray that He would show us opportunities to unite, and give us the humility and bravery to do so. And that He would protect us from division, and give us a healthy grief for the division that we, and our spiritual ancestors, have glibly participated in.

Finally, we must pray for the leaders of our church to be united, for they will lead us into greater unity or disunity. Pray that they too would overcome the pettiness of minor issues and seek to be bound together more fully rather than distinguished from each other. Pray that even their disagreements would be handled with love and humility, that unity might be preserved. Pray that Christ might use them to minister unity among the whole church, growing us together more and more as His return approaches.

PRAYER SUMMARY

- ◆ For our own hearts to be broken of pride and transformed in Gospel humility and confidence, that we might love our brothers and sisters better.
- ◆ That the Father might minister His grace to our brothers and sisters in Christ, that in Him and through Him we might all grow closer together.

- ◆ Confess that we (the church) have too easily allowed division to define us, rather than the love that Christ urged would define us.
- ◆ That He would break our hearts about the division in the church today, and bring about repentance in His church for our tendency to divide; that he would give us a spirit of unity toward one another.
- ◆ For Jesus to show us what is of the highest importance: that we are united with Him, and therefore are united with all who are His; that He would give us a greater love and unity with others, even when we have differences or disagreements.
- ◆ That God would bring about reunion within His church, allowing us to seek true unity without compromising vital truths; that He would give us discernment about which truths are of major significance and which are of minor importance.
- ◆ For Jesus' church to be brought into complete unity so that His truth and glory might be displayed to the world.

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"I thank my God every time I remember you."

—Philippians 1:3

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Above all, to Christ be all praise and glory for whatever value this humble work might be to His Bride and His Kingdom.

About the Author

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