

Pray without ceasing

Jonathan Edwards was a leading figure of the Evangelical Awakening in the 1740s. Among his many writings we find one piece with the following title: *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth*. It is frequently shortened to *An Humble Attempt*.

Although the title is long, Edward's aim is simple. It is to encourage

Christians to pray. He wanted to see God's people come together to pray in a concerted and specific manner. He believed God calls his people to such action. He found justification for such in the vision we find in Zechariah 8.20-23. There we read:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favour of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going.'

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favour of the LORD.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'

Zechariah describes, Edwards argues, the *attitude*, the *agenda*, the *impact* and the *means* for mobilizing such movement for prayer.

Attitude

The attitude of those who pray is earnest, serious and sincere. They meet with a clear purpose or aim in mind. It is to seek God. It is to plead with God for him to bless.

Agenda

The agenda of those who pray is simple and straightforward. It is to 'entreat the favour of the Lord'. God's people recognize their complete dependence upon God. They also recognize their need for him to show his favour to them.

Impact

The impact of such praying is great. It is seen in two spheres: the Church and the world.

In the Church, among God's people, there is seen a focus upon and encouragement to pray. Those born again by the Spirit of the living God eagerly stir one another up to pray.

In the world a new focus is seen. Those who hitherto have had no or very little interest in the things of God are changed. Indifference and laziness disappear. They become people who see God is with his people. And they desire to know what believers know, and to have what they have.

Means

The means or way to mobilise people to pray is inform them of what God has promised to do. What can we expect from him? That he will gather many into his Church.

Christ Jesus informed his followers that he will build his Church. His promise is that the powers of evil will never destroy it (*Matthew 16.18*). The going for the people of God at times may be tough. But we are assured that Christ and his Church shall always triumph.

Christ Jesus also promises the aid, help and power of his Spirit. The Spirit of God is given to those who believe. That, you will recall, is what Peter reminded the many who heard him preach on the Day of Pentecost

after Christ had ascended into heaven (*Acts 2.38f*). Yes, Christians are never alone. God by his Spirit is with them. He is always with them. He will never leave nor forsake them.

But those who have the Spirit of the living God living within them are those who know they need to grow more like Jesus Christ. They know they need power to witness. They know they are to worship in Spirit and in truth.

They also know the Father has promised his Spirit to those who ask him (*Luke 11.13*). We do well to note that Jesus speaks of a father knowing how to give good gifts to his children. The language he uses points from the lesser (an earthly father) to the greater (the heavenly Father, God). In other words, God's children - that is those born again by his Spirit and within whom the Spirit of God lives - can expect from God fresh workings of his Spirit within them.

The point we are seeking to make is that the Christian life is a dynamic life. It is a Spirit led life. Believers are to keep in step with the Spirit of

God (*Galatians 5.25*). They are not to grieve (*Ephesians 4.30*), nor quench (*1 Thessalonians 5.19*), nor resist (*Acts 7.51*) the Holy Spirit.

How can we avoid such sins? Surely the answer is by seeking to know more of the enabling power of the Spirit at work within us. Those who do not ask, or who ask wrongly, do not have (*James 4.2f*).

God's Promise

What does God promise? Yes, as we have seen that he will build his Church. Linked to that we also discover he has promised times of refreshing (*Acts 3.20*). What are such times? The apostle Peter indicates that such times are when many come to repent and to experience forgiveness. They are times when many know Christ coming to dwell in their hearts through faith and by his Spirit.

Is that not the need today? We cannot build Christ's Church. We cannot make people new. We cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. But Christ can. Therefore we pray. We pray for a time of awakening

among unbelievers. A time when many will have an interest in the things of God stirred up within them. A time when many will turn to Christ and embrace him by faith. This is the harvest we need and for which we long.

Christians also need refreshing or reviving. We allow ourselves to grow weary or become dispirited. We see such little growth. So few come to faith. And too few know the joy of the Lord as their strength. How is such spiritual lethargy corrected?

Times of refreshing within the Church transform the situation. In such seasons dull and prayerless church members who lack assurance, joy and power are changed.

The Spirit of God gives them life. They are filled with hope. They overflow with love for God and his people. They are also stirred up with a passionate concern for the (spiritual and material) well-being of unbelievers around them.

Amazing things happened in Edwards' day. The middle years of the 18th century saw the *Great Awakening*. It was a time of great refreshing. We look to God for something similar today. Such is urgently needed. As Matthew Henry reminds us: God's promises are to be our pleas.