

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers
Volume 98-13

Dear Reader

In the last newsletter we briefly looked at the various meetings of the local assembly as found in Scripture. Probably the poorest attended is the prayer meeting, and, sadly, many of the brothers who do attend seldom or never take part. Yet it is one of the most important meetings and has rightly been called the *power* meeting. We can carry on a *form* of a local assembly, yet have little spiritual impact because the power for spiritual blessing comes only from God. Consider some of the local assemblies the Lord wrote to in Revelation 2 and 3. His words are scathing because He and His Word were often being left out, and the assemblies lacked spiritual power and discernment. One main remedy for that kind of powerlessness is prayer!

The feature article in this issue of the newsletter is a substantially edited version of C.H. Macintosh's *Prayer and the Prayer Meeting*, originally written about 120 years ago. CHM was a beloved and much-used preacher and writer among so-called "brethren" during the 19th century. This article had to be considerably condensed to fit the newsletter. He speaks very strongly! Yet if the prayer-problem was serious a century ago when North America and Europe could be called "Christian," think how more serious is the problem today when we are living in "Laodicean" (end-time) conditions (Rev.3:14-21) -- when "peoples' rights" (the meaning of *Laodicea*), even among Christians, are more important than God's rights.

Note that prayer -- individual or collective -- won't be answered (in the sense of us getting what we ask for) if the moral basis and conditions are not met. We can't be careless in the Lord's things, living self-indulgent lives, being selective in obeying the Lord, and then expect Him to give us what we want, so we can have more fleshly pleasures and add more "weights" (Heb.12:1) to hold us back from spiritually maturing and from serving and worshiping Him. Our definite, insistent, persevering prayers are to be according to His will. And, as with Paul's health (2 Cor.12) -- an *apparently* important and necessary thing to serve the Lord by traveling as Paul was called to do, and did -- the answer to his prayer for healing was "No" so Paul would find his strength day by day only in the Lord. Paul besought the Lord three times and got a plain answer which met Paul's need, but it was not the answer he was expecting. But it was the best possible answer for Paul in the long run.

Mr. Macintosh also speaks of our *conduct* in or with respect to the prayer meetings, such as not kneeling (where possible) and of our conduct *during* prayer, which show indifference to being before the throne of God. How would we act if we had an audience with the President of the United States or the Queen of England? Where are our eyes and minds while others are praying? He also speaks of our deplorable lack of attendance at the prayer meeting. Why is that still true?

Mr. Macintosh speaks strongly against long prayers which those of us who are more accustomed to praying, easily fall into. If we pray for a long time we cheat someone else out of the privilege of prayer or discourage them because they feel they could never "say all that." For example, if there are 15 brothers who could and should pray and there is 45 minutes allotted for prayer, I am cheating someone else -- taking away his opportunity -- if I pray longer than 3 minutes (3 x 15 = 45). Soon, the younger and more timid just don't bother. I must have a great over-estimation of my self-importance if I am wilfully take another brother's time! He also speaks of hymn singing. While hymns are certainly a wonderful part of every meeting, do we use hymn singing as a crutch, as an excuse not to have to pray at the breaking of bread as well as the prayer meeting? CHM doesn't simply lay out the problems, but gives the glorious solutions found in Scripture. Are we willing to lay hold of what he says?

Enough said. Let's read what CHM ministers to us in His **PRAYER AND THE PRAYER MEETING**

In considering the subject of prayer, two things claim our attention; the *moral basis* of prayer and its *moral conditions*.

THE MORAL BASIS OF PRAYER

The basis of prayer is set forth in words such as “If you abide *in Me* and My words *abide in you*, you will ask what you desire and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7). “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask, we receive from Him *because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight*” (1 John 3:21-22). When the apostle desired to have the believers pray for him, he set forth the moral condition of his appeal as “pray for us, for we are confident that we have a good conscience, *in all things desiring to live honorably*” (Heb.13:18). Prayer is based on a good conscience.

For effective prayer there must be an obedient heart, an upright mind and a good conscience. If we aren't in communion with God, if we aren't abiding in Christ, if we aren't ruled by His holy commandments, how can we possibly look for answers to our prayers? We would be “asking amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jas.4:3). How could God, as a holy Father, grant such petitions? Impossible! We thus need to give earnest attention to the moral basis on which our prayers are presented. How could Paul have asked the brethren to pray for him if he didn't have a good conscience, an upright mind -- the moral persuasion that in all things, he *really* wished to live honestly?

We get into the habit of lightly and formally asking others to pray for us. Nothing is more precious than to be borne upon the hearts of God's dear people in their approaches to the mercy seat, but do we sufficiently pay attention to the moral basis? When we say “Brethren, pray for us,” can we add as in the presence of the Searcher-of-hearts that we have a good conscience in all things and a desire to live honorably? Likewise, when we personally bow before the throne of grace, do we have an uncondemning heart, an upright mind and are we *really* abiding in Christ and keeping His commandments?

These are searching questions. But, it is good to be thoroughly searched as to prayer. There is much lack of reality in our prayers -- a sad lack of the moral basis, a vast amount of “asking amiss” which causes a lack of power and effectiveness. David said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear” (Ps.66:18). How solemn! *Our God will have reality*. He desires truth. He is real with us and He will have us coming before Him as we really are and with what we really want.

How often it is otherwise in both private and public prayer. Our prayers are more like orations than petitions, more like statements-of-doctrine than utterances-of-need, as if we meant to explain principles to God and give Him large amounts of information. These things cast a withering influence over our prayer meetings, robbing them of their freshness, interest and value. We should attend the prayer meeting *to pray*, not to hear lectures from men on their knees. The prayer meeting is the place of expressed need and expected blessing -- the place of expressed weakness and expected power.

We write plainly! We deeply feel our lack of reality, sincerity and truth in our prayers and prayer meetings. What can be more painful than to hear a man on his knees explaining principles and unfolding doctrines? Is the man speaking to God or to us? If to *God*, nothing can be more irreverent or profane than to attempt to explain things to Him. But if to *us* then it is not prayer at all, and the sooner we rise from the floor the better, because the speaker will do better on his feet and we in our seats.

Kneeling Down

We would very lovingly call attention to a matter which, in our opinion, demands serious consideration -- the habit of sitting during the holy and solemn exercise of prayer. We are aware that the great question in prayer

is to have the *heart* in the right attitude. Also, we know that many who attend our prayer meetings are aged, sick, delicate people who cannot kneel for long, if at all. In other cases, there is a lack of space to kneel.

All these things must be taken into account, but there still is a deplorable lack of reverence in many of our prayer meetings. We frequently see young men sitting through an entire prayer meeting. We believe it grieves the Holy Spirit. We should kneel when we can: it expresses reverence and prostration. The blessed Master “knelt down and prayed” (Lk.22:41). His apostle did the same: “When he had thus spoken, he knelt down and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36).

Is this not right? Can anything be more unseemly than to see a number of people sitting, lolling, lounging, playing and gaping about while prayer is being offered? We consider it shocking and we earnestly beseech all the Lord’s people to give this matter their solemn consideration, and both by teaching and example to promote the godly habit of kneeling at our prayer meetings.

THE MORAL CONDITIONS OF PRAYER

What do the Scriptures say about the moral *conditions* of prayer? Turn to Matthew 18:19. “I say to you that if two of you agree on earth as concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.”

Unanimity (Agreement)

Here we learn that one necessary condition of our prayers is *agreement* -- sincere agreement, complete oneness-of-mind. The true force of the words is, “If two of you shall *symphonize*” -- shall make one common sound. There must be no jarring note, nothing discordant.

When we come together to pray about the progress of the gospel, we must be of one mind if we expect people to be saved in our meetings. It will not do for each to have some special thought of his own to bring up. We must come before the throne of grace in holy harmony of mind and spirit, or else we cannot claim an answer on the ground of Matthew 18:19.

This is of immense moral weight. Its importance in relation to our prayer meetings cannot be overestimated. We deplore the objectless character of our prayer meetings. We should come together with some *definite* object on our hearts for which we are going to wait together upon God. We read in Acts 1:14 that the early disciples “all continued *with one accord* in prayer and supplication, *with the women*”

Again in Chapter 2, we read, “When the day of Pentecost had fully come they were all with one accord in one place,” according to our Lord’s instructions, awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit. They had God’s promise that He would come. Instead of this promise doing away with the need for prayer, it was the very reason for it. They prayed in *one* place with *one* accord. They were thoroughly agreed. They had one definite object before them. They were waiting for the promised Spirit and they continued to wait with one accord until He came! Men and women, absorbed with one object, waited in holy agreement, in happy symphony, day after day, earnestly, fervently, harmoniously, until they received the promised power from on high.

Shouldn’t we do likewise? Our meetings lack of this one accord, one place principle. We don’t have to ask for the Holy Spirit to come for He *has* come, *but we have to ask for the display of His power in our midst*. Even if there are only two of us who feel the condition of things in our meetings, let us get together with one accord and pour out our hearts to God. Let us wait on Him in holy agreement, with united, firm purpose, until He sends showers of blessing upon the barren spot.

Nothing can touch or weaken the truth of Matthew 18:19. It stands in all its fullness, freeness and preciousness before the eye of faith. Do we mourn over the coldness and barrenness around us? Are we

discouraged by the lack of power in the preaching itself and the absence of results? Are we cast down by the barrenness, dullness and low tone of all our gatherings together, whether at the table of the Lord before the mercy seat, or around the fountain of Holy Scripture?

Are we to give up in despair, complain, murmur, fret, or be irritable? *No, we are to come together with one accord in one place and get down on our faces before our God and pour out our hearts, as the heart of one man, pleading Matthew 18:19.* This is the great remedy, the unfailing resource. God is sovereign and this is why we should wait on Him. Human effort is in vain and that is the reason to seek divine power. *We cannot get up a revival and that is the reason for seeking it by getting down on our knees.* We must beware of mere excitement, but it is equally true that we must beware of coldness, deadness and selfish indifference.

As long as Christ is at the right hand of God, as long as the Holy Spirit is in our midst and in our hearts, as long as we have the Word of God in our hands, as long as Matthew 18:19 shines before us, there is no excuse whatever for coldness and indifference, for unprofitable meetings or for fruitlessness in our service. Let us wait on God, in holy agreement, and the blessing is sure to come.

Believing Prayer

In Matthew 21:22 we find another essential moral condition of effective prayer. “Whatever you ask in prayer, *believing*, you will receive.” This is a marvelous statement! It opens the treasury of heaven to faith. There is no limit. Our blessed Lord assures us that we will receive whatsoever we ask in simple faith. James 1:5-7 gives us similar assurance in asking for wisdom. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all liberally ... and it will be given him. But (and here is the moral condition) *let him ask in faith, with no doubting*, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. Let not *that man* suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”

From both these passages we learn that if our prayers are to be answered, they must be prayers of faith. It is one thing to utter words in the *form* of prayer and another thing altogether to pray in simple faith in the full, clear and settled assurance that we will receive what we are asking for. Many of our so-called prayers never go beyond the ceiling. To reach the throne of God they must be borne on the wings of faith and proceed from hearts united and minds agreed in holy purpose to wait on our God for the things we really require.

Aren't our prayers and prayer meetings sadly deficient on this point? Shouldn't we examine ourselves as to how far we really understand these two conditions of prayer -- unanimity and confidence? Since Christ has said that if two persons agree to ask in faith, they can have whatsoever they ask, why do we not see more abundant answers to our prayers? *The fault must be with us.*

In Matthew 18:19 our Lord comes down to the smallest congregation, to *two*, although the promise applies to any larger group. The grand point is that, even if there are only two, *they should be thoroughly agreed and fully persuaded that they will get what they are asking for.* How vastly different things would be if our prayer meetings were the result of a sincere agreement on the part of two or more believers to come together and wait on God for a certain thing and to *persevere* in prayer until they receive an answer. How little we see of this!

Luke 11:5-10 (Insistence and Definiteness)

“Which of you shall have a friend and go to him at midnight and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has come on his journey and I have nothing to set before him. And he shall answer from within and say, Do not trouble me; the door is now shut and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give you. I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his *persistence* (insistence) he will rise and give him as many as he needs. And I say to you, Ask and it will be

given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened unto you, for everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened” (Lk.11:5-10).

These words are very important since they are part of our Lord’s reply to His disciples’ request, “Lord, teach us to pray.” We wouldn’t dare teach people how to pray but we *would* bring our readers into contact with the words of our blessed Lord so they may judge for themselves how far our prayers and our prayer meetings come up to the divine standard.

From this portion we see one very important moral condition of prayer is *persistence* or *insistence*. The man succeeds in gaining his object simply by his insistent earnestness. He will *not* be put off; he *must* get the three loaves. Insistence prevails even where the claims of friendship aren’t enough.

God will never say to us “Don’t trouble Me” or “I cannot rise and give you.” He always is our true and ready Friend, a cheerful, liberal Giver. Still He encourages insistence, but there is a sad lack of it in our prayer meetings, about in proportion to the lack of definiteness. The two go together. Where the thing sought is as definite as the “three loaves” there will generally be the persistent asking for it -- *the firm purpose to get it*. But we often are too vague, too indifferent in our prayers and prayer meetings, not like people asking for what they want and waiting for what they ask. This renders our prayer meetings pointless and powerless.

Luke 11 also teaches us to be *definite* in our prayers. “Friend, lend me three loaves” is the expression of a definite need. There is *one thing* on his heart and he confines himself to this one thing! It is not a long, rambling, pointless statement about all sorts of things: *it is distinct, direct and pointed*. I want *three loaves!* Everything looks discouraging. Midnight is a poor time to come. The friend has retired for the night. Still the definite need is pressed: he must have *three loaves*.

Here is a great practical lesson that may be applied to our prayers and prayer meetings. Our prayer meetings suffer from long, rambling, pointless prayers. Some of us seem to think it necessary to make one long prayer about all sorts of things -- many of them very right and good. Yet, wouldn’t we sometimes be without an answer if the Lord appeared to us at the close of our prayer meeting and asked, “What do you *really* want Me to give you or do for you?” How much better to bring *one definite object* before the throne, earnestly urge it, and pause so the Holy Spirit may lead out others in like manner, either for the same thing or something else equally definite, *which has been agreed is important*. It would impart great earnestness, freshness, glow, depth, reality and power to our prayer meetings!

Long Prayers

Long prayers are wearisome. In many cases they are a positive punishment. It may be said that we must not prescribe any time limit to the Holy Spirit. True! But we are simply comparing what we find in Scripture (where the brief-pointedness of prayer is characteristic) with what we often find in our prayer meetings. See Matthew 6; John 17; Acts 4:24-30; Ephesians 1 and 3, etc. Long prayers are not the rule in Scripture. They are referred to in Mark 12:40 in terms of *withering disapproval*. Brief, pointed, fervent prayers give freshness and interest to the prayer meetings while long, disconnected prayers usually exert a most depressing influence upon all. “The effective, *fervent* [not *long*] prayer of a righteous man avails much” (Jas.5:16).

Attendance

Because the long, tiresome, pointless prayers that sometimes characterize our prayer meetings are so intolerable to the Lord’s dear people, many stay away from the prayer meetings. They feel they are wearied and grieved instead of being refreshed, comforted and strengthened. So they judge it to be more profitable to spend the time at home where they can pour out their hearts to God in earnest prayer, than to attend a so-

called prayer meeting where they are wearied with much powerless hymn-singing or long, disconnected, preaching prayers.

We don't believe this is the right thing to do (Heb.10:25)! It isn't the way to remedy the evils that we have been discussing. Since it is right to come together for prayer, then it is not right for any to stay away because of the feebleness, failure or even the folly of some who take part in the meeting. If all stayed away, what would become of the prayer meeting? Even though we may not take part audibly, yet if we are there in a right spirit -- there to really wait on God -- we greatly help the tone of the meeting.

We should attend meetings for other reasons than our own comfort, profit and blessing. *We must think of the Lord's glory. He* has asked us to assemble together. We must seek to do His will and promote the good of others. Neither of these ends can be attained if we *deliberately* absent ourselves from the place of prayer. We emphasize the word *deliberately* -- staying away because we don't like what takes place there. Many things hinder our being present -- ill health, urgent domestic duties, lawful claims on our time. All these things have to be taken into account, *but it is a fixed principle that the one who can absent himself from the prayer meeting on purpose is in a bad state of soul.* The healthy, happy, earnest Christian will be found at the prayer meeting!

Perseverance

For another moral conditions of prayer, turn to Luke 18:1-8. "Then He spoke a parable to them that men ought *always* to pray and not to lose heart, saying, There was ... a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow ... and she came to him saying, Avenge me of my adversary. And he would not for a while, but afterwards, he said within himself, Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her lest by her *continual coming*, she weary me. Then the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect *who cry day and night to Him*, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily."

Here we have the important moral condition of *perseverance* with respect to time. This is closely connected with the definiteness and insistence already discussed. We want a certain thing; we cannot do without it. We insistently, unitedly, believingly and perseveringly wait on our God until He graciously sends an answer, as He most assuredly will if the moral basis and the moral conditions are properly maintained.

But we must persevere! We must not give up when the answer doesn't come as quickly as we might expect. It may please God to exercise us by keeping us waiting on Him for days, months or years. The exercise is good. It is morally healthful. It tends to make us real. It brings us down to the roots of things. Look for example at Daniel. He was kept waiting on God, in deep exercise, for three weeks. Daniel was mourning, chastening himself and waiting upon God. The angelic messenger was on his way with the answer. The enemy (Satan) was permitted to hinder, but Daniel continued to wait. He prayed and did not lose heart, and the answer came.

There is a lesson here for us. We also may have to wait long in the holy attitude of expectancy and in the spirit of prayer, but we shall find the time of waiting spiritually profitable. Very often our God, in His wise and faithful dealings with us, sees fit to withhold the answer simply to prove us as to the reality of our prayers. *The great point for us is to have an object laid on our hearts by the Holy Spirit -- an object that we can lay the finger of faith on some distinct promise in the Word -- and then to persevere in prayer until we get what we want.* "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end, with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph.6:18).

We are as deficient in perseverance as in definiteness and insistence, which causes the feebleness of our prayers and the coldness of our prayer meetings. We don't come together with a definite object and thus are not insistent and don't persevere. In short, our prayer meetings often are only a dull routine -- a cold,

mechanical service, something to be gone through, causing our spirit to groan beneath the burden of a profitless bodily exercise.

SUMMARY

We have spoken plainly and strongly. We call upon the whole Church of God to honestly and squarely face this matter and to look to God about it and to judge themselves as to it. We call upon all those who admit the truth of what we have been putting forth to unite in agreeing, earnest, united prayer and supplication. Let us come as one man and prostrate ourselves before the mercy seat and perseveringly wait upon our God for the revival of His work, the progress of His gospel, the ingathering and upbuilding of His beloved people.

Let our prayer meetings *really be prayer meetings* -- the place of expressed need and expected blessing, the place where God's people assemble with one accord to take hold of the very throne of God, to get into the very treasury of heaven and draw all we want for ourselves, for our families, for the whole Church of God, and for the vineyard of Christ. Such is the true idea of a prayer meeting from Scripture. May it be more fully realized among the Lord's people everywhere. May the Holy Spirit stir up all of us and press the value, importance and urgent necessity of unanimity, belief, definiteness, insistence and perseverance in all our prayers and prayer meetings!