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W. O. Vaught

Ouachita Baptist University

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POWER IN THE CHURCH

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF THE ACTS
NUMBER 16
ACTS 4:23-37

Dr. W. O. Vaught, Jr.
Immanuel Baptist Church
Little Rock, Arkansas

Here is the story of a powerful church. Verses 23-30 tell us that a powerful church is a praying church. This doesn't mean that they always had to be on their knees, or that they had to weep and moan and show how sanctimonious they were by calling attention to their praying. But it does mean that a maximum number of the people in the church had an effective prayer life.

ACTS 4:23 "And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them." The prayer meeting was caused by the report from the apostles. "Having been released" means that the Supreme Court of the land could not hold Peter and John. Peter and John had done no wrong and the Sanhedrin had no grounds whereby they could keep Peter and John in jail. So they were released, and they went immediately to the fellowship of the church. This in itself is a tremendous thing. Think for just a moment of the image a church has in a community. Some churches are known as friendly churches. Some have the reputation of being unfriendly, or cold, or formal. What do you suppose is the image of our church in this community? A spiritual church is one where people love each other, pray together, and major on the study of the Word of God. In this kind of an atmosphere, people can be relaxed, they don't find fault with each other, they don't try to run other people's business. This is the kind of atmosphere that is conducive to soul-winning and spiritual growth. Now later on, the Jerusalem Church will fail completely, but as of now, they have a real fellowship. It doesn't mean that they are shaking hands with each other every minute on the minute, or saying fine, nice things about each other, or practicing some other form of hypocrisy.

ACTS 4:24 "And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is" They all lifted up their voices to God in prayer. Since we are studying a praying church, let us pause here to get some points on the doctrine of prayer.

1. Prayer is offered up to God by the believer priest. There is no such thing as effective prayer apart from John 15:7 "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you." One must have personal faith in Christ in order to be able to pray to God.
2. All prayer must comply with the faith, rest technique. Mark 11:24 "Therefore I say unto you, what things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."
3. Prayer must be offered according to the will of God. And the only way we come to know the will of God is as we come to know the Word of God. 1 John 5:14 "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us."
4. Prayer must be offered on the principle of the filling of the Spirit. We must be in fellowship with God in order to pray. Ephesians 6:18 "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit...."
5. Prayer cannot be heard by God when the believer is living in carnality. Psalm 66:18 "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."
6. Prayer must always be accompanied by thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:20 "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."
7. Prayer is always offered on a grace basis. Hebrews 4:16 "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

8. Prayer must have an agenda.
 - a. Confession 1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
 - b. Thanksgiving Ephesians 5:20 as listed above in No. 6.
 - c. Intercession Ephesians 6:18 "Supplication for all the saints."
 - d. Petition Hebrews 4:16 as given above in No. 7.

Since we have mentioned above that carnality is a hindrance to prayer, we should mention here the eight reasons why prayers are not answered.

1. Failure to be filled with the Spirit. 1 John 3:22 "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight."
2. Mental type carnality. Psalm 66:18 Listed above in no. 5.
3. Selfishness James 4:2-3 "Ye have not because ye ask not. Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your own selfish pleasures."
4. Lack of compassion. Proverbs 21:13 "Whoso stoppeth his ear at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard."
5. Lack of domestic tranquility. 1 Peter 3:7 "Likewise ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."
6. Pride and self-righteousness. Job 35:13 "There they cry, but none giveth answer, because of the pride of evil men."
7. Disobedience to the will of God. 1 John 5:14 as listed on page 1.
8. Failure to apply faith to your prayers. Matthew 21:22 "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."

Notice, these people were commanded to lift up their voices in prayer in the name of the Lord. The word for Lord is DESPOTES, the word from which we get despot. Prayer is always addressed to God the Father.

It says here that God made Heaven and earth. In Col. 1:16 and in John 1:3 and in Hebrews 1:10, it says that Christ is the creator. There is no conflict in these passages. God the Father made the earth in that he designed the earth. Jesus is always the instrument in creation. God made the earth in that he designed it, but Jesus created it. One is a mental function and the other is a mechanical function.

ACTS 4:25-27 "Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together" Here we have a quotation from the Second Psalm. This Scripture is given as an application rather than an interpretation.

The Sanhedrin has gathered together against Christ. Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the Sanhedrin were all against Christ.

ACTS 4:28 "For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done" Though they did it, they were actually just carrying out what God had before determined should be done. They don't really know what the Sanhedrin was going to do to them, but they knew that they wanted the will of God done in their lives and in their church.

ACTS 4:29-30 "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." They were praying for power. They wanted boldness to speak the true word of God. They were asking God for power. Power in a church comes from prayer. In fact, prayer is the greatest instrument of power in the church.

The Results

ACTS 4:31-32 "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." In verse 31 we have the witnessing of the lips. In verse 32 we have the witnessing of the life. The place was shaken to show them that God was the power in witnessing. Boldness came through the filling of the Spirit. Remember, you cannot communicate something you do not understand. Prayer is powerful, but please remember, prayer is not a panacea for all things. Prayer does not take the place of learning and knowing doctrine.

Notice that God used all kinds of people here. God doesn't change your personality when you are converted. Just because you are converted, you don't have to look long-faced and sour. All you need to do is to let the Lord live his life over again in you.

Now, we have studied before that Christianity is not communism. But these people are in a very unusual situation. "Having all things common" was an idiom for charity. They helped those who needed help. The Bible is anti-communistic to the core.

ACTS 4:33 "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all." The main topic of their preaching was the resurrection of Christ. Their gospel centered around a living Lord, not a dead crucified Christ. They explained that by the resurrection God placed his approval on what Christ had preached and what he had done. This also is the great victory of Christianity and is a picture of the victory which awaits every Christian of all time. This stability for the future gave them stability in this time of need.

ACTS 4:34 "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold," There was no pressure put on them to give in this way. They gave because they loved. This is why we should give. It is wrong to tithe to try to bribe God into blessing you. Please remember, God can't be bribed by your little ten percent. Giving is glorious if it is from the principle of grace. Take a look at this Jerusalem church.

1. They at first had great power. Their power came from prayer and from giving. They were filled with the Spirit and this was their power. Their power also came from faithful witnessing.
2. Later on the Jerusalem church declined and phased out. They were powerful for only about twenty-five years.
 - a. The Jerusalem church declined because of legalism. Human power was substituted for divine power.
 - b. They lost their power because of ignorance of doctrine. A powerful church must know the Word.
 - c. They lost their power from infiltration of false doctrine. If you don't know Bible doctrine, you will drift into other doctrine not based on the Word of God.
 - d. They lost their power because of a compromise with Judaism.
 - e. They lost their power because of hypocrisy. This is why in the Book of James, we find so much written to the scattered members of this Jerusalem church about hypocrisy.

These things will destroy any church. The Jerusalem church eventually disappeared.
POWER-----DECLINE-----EXTINCTION. That is the history of this Jerusalem church.

But it was not all bad. This Jerusalem church provided a pioneering function, and
from this church, Christianity spread all across the earth until it finally reached
our shores. Good missionary work is always based on the filling of the Spirit----
PRAYER-----WITNESSING-----GIVING.