

MODELING THE PRAYER IN LUKE-ACTS FOR EFFECTIVE CHURCH GROWTH  
IN CHANGING CULTURES

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

With twenty years of servant leadership involvement in churches and para-church organization, an important problem I have observed is prayerlessness. The church does not do prayer in a way consistent with the teachings and practices of prayer in Luke and Acts. The “church” by definition is a congregation or a gathering of people modeling “an altar/pulpit centered worship of our triune God and whose activities conform to the ecclesiological ideals of holiness, unity, catholicity, apostolicity, orthodoxy, and ordinances as well as to the essential works of evangelism, edification and glorification.”<sup>1</sup> The significance of the problem is that when we shift our attention away from the focus and priorities for effective, persistent and God-honoring prayer demonstrated by the early church through the dynamic, servant leadership of Peter and other Apostles in Acts; we lack the ability to confront, combat and triumph over the evils or negative forces of the last days that are contending with the church’s ability for revival and growth (Ephesians. 6: 10-18).

Furthermore, the lack of a praying culture consistent with the Luke-Acts teachings on prayer is an important problem to be addressed in the sense that, so long as the foundation for our faith is built on the Apostles and prophets with our Lord Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Savigel, *Retro-Christianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 145-218.

Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20), any non-conformity to the approach and priorities for prayer seen in Luke and embraced by the Apostles will impact personal and corporate/congregational responsibility for true and spirit-filled worship of our God (John 4:24).

Historically, all of God's people and by implication the church are expected to be people of prayer (Exodus. 3:7; Isaiah 55: 6-7; Jeremiah 33:3; Acts 1:14, 2:21, 9:14,21; and Romans 8: 26-27). The primary function of the church is to pray. This view is supported by Christ's words that "My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer" (Mark 11:17 and Isaiah. 56:7). The constant practice and intensity of prayer by the early church were critical to achieving God's purpose and experiencing His spiritual blessings, gifts and workings of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated throughout the book of the Acts. Our Lord Jesus, who is our best example of how to pray, demonstrated a constant and consistent life of prayer (Mark 1:35, 3:13, 6: 30-32; Matthew 6: 5, 14:23; and John 11: 41-42, 17: 1-25). How do we build and sustain dependency on God and fellowship with Him without a dedicated life of prayer?

Moreover, I have observed from my experiences at churches and from interactions with fellow believers that the motivations for prayer typically center around physical prosperity - acquisition of temporal, earthly possessions as opposed to focus on things of eternal, kingdom values. Praying to the Lord for daily provisions is a right thing to do and in fact part of our Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6: 9-13 and Luke 11: 2-4. However, our prayer life should not be limited to petitioning for daily provisions but must speak to the entire contents of the Lord's Prayer and Christ's teachings on prayer in

Luke. In the course of sharing my passion for the prayer ministry with friends, I have heard some of them attesting to the growing problem of prayerlessness in the local church that is expected to nurture a great lifestyle of prayer in growing believers. Even in the African culture where I grew up, my observation is that emphasis on prayer is primarily driven by personal and societal needs. Because of prayerlessness, the church is not experiencing the move of God in terms of the revival, spiritual awakening and high rate of conversions witnessed during the time of the early church.

My intention for wishing to research the above stated problem is not to try to make any assessment of the local church which is the body of Christ. I do not believe that we are allowed to do so. Our Lord Jesus is the head of His church. He instituted the church (Matthew 16:18) and He continues to build and nurture His church to present “her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27, NIV). But if the church fails to pray and persist in prayerlessness, then she is not following the Master’s instruction to pray at all times (Luke 18:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

There can be no substitute to a personal or a congregational life totally dependent on the Lord through the practice of effective prayer consistent with the teachings and foundation for prayer exemplified in Luke-Acts. That is why I want to through this research, explore, demonstrate and canvas the Luke-Acts way of prayer as the right, biblically acceptable and theologically informed way of prayer that should be embraced by the local church, church’s servant leaders and every follower of Christ

tasked with the responsibility of honoring the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 18-20) and shepherding God's flock under their care (1 Peter 5: 1-3).

Of critical importance to what I wish to learn from this research as well as for applications to others is why today's church does not pray frequently in line with Luke 18 and the practice of the early church in Acts? Is the cause of prayerlessness in the church a leadership problem or a congregational issue? Or is it a result of a lack of understanding on the right way to pray? An understanding of the reasons for prayerlessness in the church will help in coming with a plausible solution. I have heard people say they just do not know what to say during prayer, so part of the problem of prayerlessness in the church is the lack of knowledge of what a God-honoring and God-centered prayer is all about. There is a wrong notion about prayer that must be corrected.

I believe that the church exists by His sovereign will (Matthew 16:18) for the purpose of glorifying and worshipping Him in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24), shepherding of the flock of God (1 Peter 5: 2-4) and serving as His witness to all nations (Matthew 28: 18-20, Mark 16: 15-16, Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8).<sup>2</sup> Of course global missions cannot be done effectively and successfully in today's world without having to contend with cultural differences both internally and externally.

The ever growing cultural dynamics that have reshaped our post-modern world is well captured by Andrew Seidel's *Charting A Bold Course*, in which he stated as follows: "Clearly there are generational changes, but there are also social changes, ethnic changes, and economic changes, among others, in the area around the church. At the

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter varsity, 1995), 92-115.

beginning of the 21st Century the pace of change has accelerated to the point that a local church must continually sharpen its vision, reevaluate its culture, and focus its ministries in order to be able to minister effectively to a rapidly changing external culture.”<sup>3</sup> These are facts and we do know too from Genesis 11: 1-8 that cultural changes have always existed since the beginning of the plurality of nations. The Apostles and the early church had cultural issues but they thrived physically, numerically and spiritually due to the unwavering commitments to a culture of persistent, faithful and a community-based approach to prayer (Acts 6:4; Ephesians 1: 16-23, 3: 14-20; Colossians 1: 9-27; and Philippians 4: 6-7).

The problem of prayerlessness in the church that this research is addressing is the lack of recognition and practice of a praying culture consistent with two parables in Luke 18 and critical to: (1) living and enjoying the life of victory that Christ wants for His church (1 John 5: 4-5), (2) fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 18-20), (3) the church’s growth in faith and power of the Holy Spirit and (4) the church’s preparations for His eschatological kingdom (Luke 11:2).<sup>4</sup>

My goal is to learn from the Luke-Acts prayer practices as these speak to the problem of prayerlessness in the church, and to use this learning or understanding to offer a practical, feasible solution to the problem of prayerlessness in today’s church.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Seidel, *Charting A Bold Course: Training Leaders for 21st Century Ministry* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003), 193-211.

<sup>4</sup> Darrel L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridgepoint Books, 2000), 212-232.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

#### **What Does the Scripture say?**

Luke 18: 1-14 and Acts 6: 4 appeal to the heart of the problem of prayerlessness in the church. Both passages illustrate the indispensability of unceasing prayer to the activities of the church. The problem of prayerlessness in the church is not merely restricted to the inability to remain faithful in prayer without giving up but encompasses the lack of the right approach and attitude to a penitent, God-honoring prayer. It becomes an issue when the prayer life of the church lacks fervency, continuity and the right attitude to receiving from our sovereign God. Failure to persist in prayer undermines the efficacy of uncompromising faith that James 1: 5-8 portray. The two parables spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 18 address this problem. In Luke 17, the focus of Christ's teaching was on the coming eschatological kingdom of God. He introduced by the question of the Pharisees concerning the timing of the coming of the kingdom (17:20). He briefly answered their question and then turned His attention to His disciples, instructing them concerning the kingdom.

Exegetically, the focus in Luke 18 is still the kingdom of God but with emphasis on prayer. Contextually, the two parables have to do with the church's need to remain faithful in prayer for His coming kingdom and not surrender to adversity, persecution and trials of faith. The first parable (verses 1-8), that of persistency in prayer,

is taught by contrasting God, the righteous, merciful Judge who will speedily bring justice to the earth at His time, with the unrighteous, wicked judge who reluctantly and after much begging gives the persistent, poor and helpless widow the vindication and justice she so desired.

In the second parable (verses 9-14), the emphasis is on praying with the right attitude and faith towards our sovereign God who alone determines which and when prayer gets answered. The prayer of the self-exhorting Pharisee fell short of the requirement for justification before a holy, just God. Only by faith and through faith alone in God (Hebrews 11:6) can we approach Him for mercy and answers to our requests. It is not on the basis of one's position or long standing in the church.

The church exists not by her merit but on Christ's perfect atoning work on the cross. Consequently, the church must continuously seek Christ, for without Him we can do nothing (John 5:15). This is what the parable of the persistent widow teaches. As remarked by Robert L. Deffinbaugh, this parable "is occasioned by the fact that Jesus' coming will not be immediate but that it will occur later on in time. In addition, during this time of 'delay' men will react to and resist Christians just as they did Christ. Thus, there is a real danger of Christ's disciples losing heart and ceasing to pray for the coming of His kingdom as they ought. This is suggested at the beginning of the paragraph and at

the end as well. The last words of our Lord in this paragraph are, ‘However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?’”<sup>1</sup>

God’s faithfulness is not called into question in Luke 18:8. It is about whether or not His church will remain steadfast and faithful in her responsibility to pray and persevere in the midst of trials and temptations. Robert L. Deffinbaugh stated that “The unrighteous judge delayed because he didn’t care about God or man; the Lord Jesus delays out of compassion on guilty men, giving them time to repent and be saved. The unrighteous judge only cared about reducing his “pain,” while the righteous Judge came to suffer the greatest pain of all—the just wrath of God—in order to save fallen man. The unjust judge brought about justice slowly and reluctantly, but the Just Judge of all the earth will hastily bring about justice when He returns to the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The church’s concern need not be about how long it might take for Him to answer, just like the widow was not bothered by the lengthy delay. She used the only weapon at her disposal which was persistence petitioning. The implication of this is that persistent prayer is a major weapon of warfare that the church needs to deploy to prevail over the enemy. She kept the focus on what she wanted and how she knew she could get it. The church should maintain the focus on Christ through persistent prayer. The church must not yield to the temptation of delays in prayer to quit praying. It is dangerous and counterproductive to do so. Alexander MacLaren stated: “the delays of God’s help are a constant feature in His providence, and, as Jesus says (in Luke 18: 1-8), they are but too

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Deffinbaugh, “*Piety, Persistence, Penitence and Prayer*,” Series on Luke, 2004, accessed January 7, 2015, <https://bible.org/seriespage/56-piety-persistence-penitence-and-prayer-luke-181-14>.

likely to take the life out of faith. But over against these we have to place Jesus' triumphant assurance here: 'He will avenge them speedily.' Yes, the longest delay may yet be 'right early,' for heaven's clock does not beat at the same rate as our little chronometers. God is 'the God of patience,' and He has waited for millenniums for the establishment of His kingdom on earth; His 'own elect' may learn long-suffering from Him, and need to take to heart the old exhortation, 'If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come, and will not tarry.' Yes, God's delays are not delays, but are for our profit that we may always pray and not faint, and may keep alight the flame of the sure hope that the Son of man cometh, and that in His coming all adversaries shall be destroyed, and the widow, no longer a widow, but the bride, go in to the feast and forget her foes, and 'the days of her mourning be ended.'"<sup>2</sup>

Christ concluding words on this parable is a rhetorical question "However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth" (Luke 18:8, NIV)? The implication of this is that prayerlessness may lead to faithlessness. Prayer offers a unique way to for the church to demonstrate trust and confidence in God, and so a lack of prayer will call into question the church's trustworthiness in the living God. The idea that we pray only when there is a felt need is not consistent with the model of persistent prayer that the parable in Luke 18: 1-8 teaches. The church as a spiritual, living organism must be sustained through persistent prayer in order to stay healthy and foster spiritual growth and unity (Ephesians 4: 1-16). If a church does not persist in prayer, then it calls into

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander MacLaren, "*Expositions Of Holy Scripture*," , Three Kinds of Praying, 2004, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/maclaren/luke/18.htm>.

question her commitment to an uncompromising faith Christ. The question asked by Christ in Luke 18:8 speaks to the importance of a prayer-preserving faith as well as to the danger that prayerlessness poses to the faith of a congregation awaiting His eschatological return. In describing the meaning of the “faith” (πίστιν) as used in Luke 18:8, David A. Mappes in an article published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* refers to it as the act of trust or faithfulness and the doctrinal truth that Jesus will return. Mappes wrote, “The widow's persistent refusal to lose heart is an example for believers (the church) not to be discouraged as they await the return of Christ. In an age of injustice disciples (followers of Christ) are not to lose heart (μη ἔγκακειν, Luke 18:1) but are to continue to pray (δέϊν πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι). This sense of praying for God's intervention is common in Luke's writings (Luke 11:2; 22:42; Acts 4:25-30; 12:5). By emphasizing God's ability to bring about both temporal and ultimate justice, Jesus was reminding His disciples that if they do not focus on Him and His return, they will indeed lose heart.”<sup>3</sup> The church must learn to keep watch through persistent prayer in order to overcome and become partakers of His coming eschatological kingdom.

Contextually, the second parable (verses 9-14) addresses the issue of what is the right attitude of a God-honoring prayer. The way we pray must not only be fervent and frequent, they should always be done with total humility and dependency on God's sovereign grace and mercy. The Pharisee loved to pray to be seen by men or to fulfill a religious obligation. This kind of self-exhorting prayer is considered hypocritical

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<sup>3</sup> David A. Mappes, “What is the meaning of faith in Luke 18:8” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (2010): 292.

(Matthew 6: 5-6). Hypocritical prayer is prayerlessness. It does not attract God's blessing. It is critically important that the disciples, who will soon constitute the pioneers of the New Testament church, understands the approach to a God-honoring prayer.

Alexander MacLaren captured the problem with the Pharisee's kind of prayer in the below statements.

Every word in the Pharisee's prayer is reeking with self-complacency. Even the expression 'prayed with himself' is significant, for it suggests that the prayer was less addressed to God than to himself, and also that his words could scarcely be spoken in the hearing of others, both because of their arrogant self-praise and of their insolent calumnies of all the rest. It was not prayer to God, but soliloquy in his own praise, and it was in equal parts adulation of himself and slander of other men. So it never went higher than the inner roof of the temple court, and was, in a very fatal sense, 'to himself.' God is complimented with being named formally at first, and in the first two words, 'I thank thee,' but that is only formal introduction, and in all the rest of his prayer there is not a trace of praying. Such a self-satisfied gentleman had no need to ask for anything, so he brought no petitions. He uses the conventional language of thanksgiving, but his real meaning is to praise himself to God, not to thank God for himself. God is named once. All the rest is I, I, I. He had no longing for communion, no aspiration, no emotion.<sup>2</sup>

The attitude of the Pharisee was one of self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, self-justifying and lacked respect for others. Only a righteous God can justify a sinner, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Because all have sinned, we lack the qualification to approach a holy and just God on the basis of who we are and what we have accomplished. The qualification is faith in Him alone (Hebrews 11:6). All that the Pharisee did amounted to prayerlessness. Matthew Henry characterized the people who fall into the category of the Pharisee as "those who trusted in themselves to be righteous, and looked down on others as not worthy to be compared with them. They had a confidence in themselves before God, and not only had a high opinion of their own righteousness, but depended upon the merit of it, whenever they addressed God, as their

plea: They trusted in themselves as being righteous; and, they thought they had made God their debtor, and might demand anything from him<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, the Publican put the focus of His prayer on God who alone justifies a sinner (Luke 18: 13-14). He focused on his own righteousness, but only for that which God may grant out of His abundant grace and mercy. The Publican was not seeking justification for his actions but asked God for mercy and forgiveness of his sins. The Publican did not compare himself to others but focused solely on receiving God's mercy and blessing. His prayer shows humility, honesty, faith and genuine repentance. His prayer is a reminder of the faithful, God-honoring, penitent prayer of Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4: 9-10.

Both Luke and Acts record the initial struggles of the disciples who later became successful pioneers and effective leaders of the early church in Acts. They struggled and were devoid of spiritual sensitivity and discernment due to prayerlessness. The disciples' initial lack of spiritual sensitivity and discernment came to light in Acts 1 shortly after the resurrected Christ had appeared to them. They were instructed by the Master in Luke 24:49 to wait in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power from on high. However, we read in Acts 1:6 that "when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel (NIV)?" "He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, "Commentary on Luke 18," Verses 9-14, accessed December 21, 2014, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Luke.18.9-Luke.18.14>.

you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1: 6-8, NIV). They needed to prepare themselves through prayer for the coming and indwelling of the promised Holy Spirit.

They eventually heeded the Master’s voice and waited through prayer in the Upper Room. We read from Acts as follows: “These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (Acts 1:14, NIV). We see here the harmony that existed among them once they chose to be in continual prayer. Effective prayer unites. The issue of disharmony, in-fighting and/or misunderstandings among believers and even servant leaders may not necessarily be a reflection of cultural dynamics within the group but a lack of persistency in prayer. The gathering was about 120 (Acts 1: 15) and despite the diversities in age, gender and nationalities, these believers were united. Because of their unity, and persistence in prayer, it was no surprise that the Holy Spirit came on them on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-4). Even though as pointed out by Professor Graham Twelftree that the “Spirit comes not in direct response to prayer but according to God’s determination and timing to devoted or prayerful people”, their obedience to wait on God through prayer prepared and positioned them to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We must ask in order to receive (Matthew 7:7) and only a devoted, consistent prayer can ensure this. Also, as pointed out by Professor Graham, “it is not that prayer causes the coming of the Spirit – that has been shown to be the province and gift of God

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<sup>5</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, “Prayer and the Coming of the Spirit in Acts” Expository Times 117 (2007), 271.

– but that prayer produces or perhaps is part of the identification of the kind of people on whom God sends His spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

Having recognized the importance of effective prayer and corporate prayer to the mission and growth of the church, the disciples and the early church in Acts hardly performed any activity without prayer. The lame man at the beautiful gate was restored through Peter’s prayer in the name of the Lord (Acts 3: 1-9). In the midst of severe persecution they did not cease to pray. Paul and Silas chose to worship and pray following their imprisonment in Acts 16: 20-26.

Even when there were other needs, the Apostles never sacrificed unceasing prayer. The fast-pace, exponential growth of the early church presented challenges, but the leaders remained committed to praying continually (Acts 6: 1-3), and the church modeled this as demonstrated in Acts 12 when the church prayed without ceasing for Peter’s rescue from his captors. Paul’s life and ministry modeled the approach to persistent prayer in Luke 18 and no wonder he exhorted the church to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Our Lord Jesus Christ persisted and persevered to the end through prayer during His earthly redemptive mission. He did not give up on the Father’s redemptive mission (Matthew 1:21). Isaiah 53: 1-12 prophesied concerning the cross of Christ including His rejection and all He must suffer on account of being made as a substitute for our sins. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5: 21). He

overcame temptations and pains of laying down His life for us through prayer. He learned obedience, patience and perseverance through prayer. The Gethsemane experience in Matthew 26: 36-43 details how He persevered and prevailed through prayer. Even His very last words on the cross were that of prayer. “Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46, NIV). I compared Christ’s Gethsemane experience with Elijah’s petition to God in Romans 11: 2-4, and found out that the reason for Elijah’s shortcoming was because of his own resignation to fate. Rather than putting the focus on God as Christ did, he put the attention on himself. He cried out “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me. And what was God’s answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (Romans 11: 2-4). He did not persist in prayer at this time. On the other hand, our Lord Jesus Christ persisted in prayer to the end, thus living out what he taught in Luke 18.

### **Modern Views on the Problem of Prayerlessness in the Church**

Two issues about prayerlessness in church addressed by modern authors are (1) the absence of prayer meetings, and (2) the lack of persistency in prayer. The first issue is well captured in an article by Grant R. Osborne. Osborne wrote, “Prayer was much more central in the life the church in the first century than it is today. Prayer meetings today are a thing of the past, and even the pastoral prayer has been jettisoned in many churches. The average Christian today considers prayer almost entirely a private activity, while the

early church reversed that and thought first of corporate prayer and then individual prayer. From the beginning corporate prayer was the core of the early church's life."<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Benson in his commentary on Luke 18 uses the parable of the persistent widow to assert that people appear to be non-committal to continuing in prayer because God does not immediately grant their requests. Joseph Benson's analysis of the parable is presented below.

At all times, on all occasions, or frequently, (as the word παντοτε, here rendered always, signifies, John 18:20,) and not to faint — Under their trials, not to despond, or yield to evils, as εκκακειν, here used, signifies, so as to be wearied out by them, and cease from prayer, as unavailing to procure relief. It frequently happens, that after men have prayed for any particular blessing, they desist, because God does not immediately grant them their petition. To show the evil of this, and to recommend importunity and perseverance in prayer especially when we are in pursuit of any spiritual mercy or mercies, relating either to ourselves, our friends, or the church of God, the present parable is introduced. As delivered on this occasion, it seems to have been principally designed to inspire the disciples with earnestness and perseverance in their prayers for the coming of the Son of man to destroy the Jewish constitution, notwithstanding God should long defer the accomplishment of their desire. For this event is represented, not only here, but in several other passages of Scripture, as a thing exceedingly to be wished for in those days. The reason was the Jews in every country were their bitterest persecutors, and the chief opposers of Christianity. Independent of this, however, in the course of his ministry, our Lord often recommended frequency, earnestness, and perseverance in prayer, not because God is, or can be, ever wearied out with our importunity; but because it is both an expression and exercise of our firm belief of, and confidence in, His power and goodness, without which it would not be fit for God to bestow His blessings upon us, nor would we be capable of receiving and using them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Grant R. Osborne, "Moving forward on our knees: Corporate prayer in the New Testament," JETS 53 (2010): 243.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Benson, "Commentary on *the Old and New Testament*," Luke 18, 2004, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/luke/18.htm>.

In her comparative study of today's churches with the early church, Cheryl Sacks discovered that the practice of continual, fervent prayer that characterized the early church was no longer visible in modern day churches. According to Sacks "the early church was awakened, equipped, and mobilized to pray. They prayed in the temple, in one another's homes, and in the streets. They even had a special room where they assembled for prayer (Acts 1: 13-14). The Upper Room was filled with activity; people were always coming and going. Many believe that it was a place where prayer was going on continuously -24/7."<sup>8</sup>

Why is that today's churches are not modeling the praying culture of the early church? Why is it that the way we do prayer in today's churches does not speak to the practice of persistent prayer illustrated by our Lord Jesus in Luke 18: 1-8? In a survey of some two hundred pastors and prayer leaders to make a list of the reasons churches do not pray or pray more, Cheryl Sacks, came up with the following: "(1) busyness with other activities to the detriment of a committed prayer life, (2) apathy or the lack of desire to spend time with the Lord, (3) people feel to be self-sufficient that church leaders and congregation can run things themselves, and (4) lack of leadership to guide the vision for prayer in churches due to leaders focus on other ministry activities<sup>8</sup>".

Another important issue addressed by Cheryl Sacks addressed is whether or not prayer in the church should be the sole responsibility of the church's prayer ministry. Many congregants share the views that members of the prayer ministry should be the ones praying and not the entire church. Cheryl Sacks stated as follows.

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<sup>8</sup> Cheryl Sacks, *The Prayer Saturated Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), 23-29.

It is important to distinguish between a church with a prayer ministry and one that is a house of prayer. Prayer ministry is a broad term defining a church's strategies for involving their congregation in prayer. A prayer ministry could be as simple or as complex as a church chooses to make it. Traditional prayer ministries involve only a portion of the congregation, usually those with the greatest desire or burden to pray. In a true house of prayer, we see prayer saturating every aspect of individual and corporate church life. Communication with our Father is the lifeblood of the church – an indispensable pillar- without which God-given dreams, gifting, and spiritual power lie dormant. In a house of prayer, talking and listening to God characterize worship services, business meetings, and even informal social gatherings. The whole congregation is involved in a lifestyle of drawing near to Him. Establishing a prayer ministry can be a positive step toward becoming a house of prayer. However, this can happen only when we realize that a prayer ministry is a means to an end, not an end in itself. God's purposes are hindered when we look at prayer ministry as just another program of the church. Prayer is a communion with the living God. Without prayer, the life flow from Christ to His body is cut off; the church ceases to be a living organism and becomes little different from any other organization. In the Old Testament, God's house or temple was built of stone, but in the New Testament it was built of His people. The defining characteristic of that new house is that God's very presence would dwell among His people in a love relationship through prayer. No record exists in the Scripture of another way God prefers to relate to His people. Having a praying church is not just a good idea; it is the foundation from which everything else flows.<sup>8</sup>

Addressing the problem of prayerlessness in today's church also boils down to the expectations for a praying church. According to Cheryl Sacks, we should expect to see the following in a praying church: "most members have a strong devotional prayer life and are committed to praying for others, church members have a biblical understanding of who God is and how they can relate personally to Him through prayer, leaders are praying people and set an example of prayer for the congregation, prayer is a way of life throughout the church, corporate prayer meetings are given high priority in the lives of the church's leaders and congregation, spending time in the presence of the Lord produces humility, purity, unity, compassion, and Christ likeness in the lives of leaders

and the congregation, and God's presence fills His house<sup>6</sup>." We see these attributes in the early church in Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2: 1-47, 4: 33-37, 5: 13-15, 6: 3-7, 9:31). There is no doubt then that the approach to persistent prayer demonstrated by the early church in Acts provides the right way to a God-honoring and Spirit-filled prayer necessary for the growth of the church in worship, word, evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual maturity of the saints.

John Piper, in his book *Let the Nations be Glad* views the issue of prayerlessness as due to the church's lack of awareness to the fact that we are in a war zone. He stated as follows: "Unless the church have a wartime mentality, the biblical teaching about the urgency of prayer and the watching in prayer and the perseverance of prayer and the danger of abandoning prayer will make no sense and find no resonance in our hearts. When we (the church) try to turn into a civilian intercom to increase our conveniences, it stops working, and our faith begins to falter. We have so domesticated prayer that for many of us it is no longer what it was designed to be – a wartime walkie-talkie for the accomplishment of mission."<sup>9</sup> John Piper's statements are a reminder of the attitude showed by the widow in Luke 18: 1-8. It was not convenient for her to keep going to the unrighteous, unfriendly judge, yet she refused to be passive. She persisted and her efforts paid off. What the church is fighting against are not physical human beings but spiritual powers and so the church must always be on the alert, in full combat readiness through prayer (Ephesians 6: 10-18).

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<sup>9</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 45-51.

Furthermore, Piper's statements are a reminder that the church is not immune to persecution and trials and must constantly be on the alert through prayer. The early church in Acts suffered intense persecution but never gave up the responsibility to persist in prayer. Matthew Henry's insights on Peter's divine deliverance out of prison in Acts 12 are complementary to Piper's view on the need for the church to see prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie for the accomplishment of mission. Before his imprisonment, Peter had been very instrumental to the missional and ecclesiological growth of the early church (Acts 3: 1-23, 4: 8-35). In Matthew Henry's view, the early church refused to be silent but cried out to God for Peter's release through ceaseless prayer. Henry stated: "One thing that magnified Peter's deliverance was that it was a signal answer to prayer (Acts 12:5): Peter was kept in prison with a great deal of care, so that it was altogether impossible, either by force or by stealth, to get him out. But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him, for prayers and tears are the church's arms; therewith she fights, not only against her enemies, but for her friends: and to these means they have recourse. They prayed without ceasing. It was an extended prayer; they prayed for his release in their public assemblies; then they went home, and prayed for it in their families; then retired into their closets, and prayed for it there; so they prayed without ceasing. Times of public distress and danger should be praying times with the church; we must pray always."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry, "Commentary on Acts 12," From Verses 5 to 19, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Acts.12.5-Acts.12.19>.

Another reflection from Piper's work on prayer as contained in *Let the Nations be Glad* is that addressing prayerlessness means that the church must not be on the defensive but on the offensive. An offensive lifestyle of prayer is part of the strategies for effective intercessory prayer that Beni Johnson advocated in her book *The Happy Intercessor*. An offensive prayer, according to Johnson, is one that requires we hit the mark in our prayers by praying in line with the Bible, which is what God has given us to show us His heart.<sup>11</sup>

In addressing the need for effective, ceaseless prayer, Lewis Sperry Chafer submitted that the church's commitment to prayer should be the same as that of preaching of the Word. He wrote that "while effective preaching is one of the necessary means in answering faithful prayer (Rom. 10: 13, 14), it is equally true that for the preaching to be effective it must be in the demonstration and power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> Persistent prayer in Chafer's view must always be the pursuit of the church and everyone must be involved. In using John 14:14 to argue for human involvement in prayer Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote that while "God reserves to Himself the undertaking and accomplishment of every object of human intercession, He assigns to man the service of prayer."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Beni Johnson, *The Happy Intercessor* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2009), 39-58.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis S. Chafer, *True Evangelism – Winning Souls through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 66 – 67.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROPOSED SOLUTION

The way out of the problem of prayerlessness is to embrace and practice a congregation-based approach to prayer. This is what the early church in Acts did. The current altar/pulpit approach to prayer whereby only the pastor, elders and perhaps members of the church's prayer team pray is hindering the congregation from developing a lifestyle of prayer consistent with Christ's teachings in Luke 18. An altar/pulpit prayer allows only the leadership to be involved in leading church's prayer meetings without soliciting participation from the rest of the congregation. All must pray, embrace prayer as a way of life and remain faithful to it till the end. The problem of prayerlessness in the church concerns both the leadership and the congregation. The congregation needs an enabling environment and opportunities to grow in prayer and the leadership must see to this. It is wrong for the leadership to assume sole control and responsibility over the practice of prayer in the church without encouraging and mobilizing the entire congregation in persistent, prevailing prayer.

As part of dealing with prayerlessness in the church, we must first and foremost identify the reasons why the church does not pray or pray more and then articulate feasible, practicable solutions that speak to a congregation-based approach to prayer. In addition to the four reasons stated in Chapter Two from Cheryl Sacks' "Prayer

Saturated Church”, I will like to add the following based on my personal experience and interactions with believers.

1. The lack of patience in approaching our very patient God. The fast-pace nature of our world and the advances in technologies in which with a click of a computer button we can search and get information within seconds is not helping the ability to persist in prayer before our ever present and patient Father. As His church we must realize that our continuing growth in His grace and knowledge as well as our quest for victory over trials of life is not what we can get from human efforts. The church must not yield to the temptation of delays in prayer to quit praying. It is dangerous and counterproductive to do so.
2. The lack of awareness of the recognition that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12, NIV).
3. Lack of discipline and self-denial that persistent prayer demands

With consideration for the reasons for prayerlessness stated above and on Chapter 2, developing and implementing a very effective congregation-based approach to prayer will require the following critical steps:

(1) Leadership/pastoral responsibility in ensuring that the congregation understands and appreciates the need for persistent prayer. I believe the notion that the church is called mainly to preach or teach (Matthew 28: 18-19, Mark 16:15) needs to be corrected. The early church was committed to both the ministry of the word and prayer. I provide below

what the leadership must do to ensure that the congregation sees prayer as an indispensable service.

(A) Encourage the congregation through regular teachings on prayer using passages from Luke, Acts and other parts of the Bible that address why should we pray, what happen when we pray and why we need to be patient to receive from the Lord. The church needs to be encouraged by the leadership that delays to prayers are not denials and that persistent prayer is needed to deepen faith and relationship with a loving, patient, kind, compassionate and righteous God who is not willing that any should perish but come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). The congregation needs to see the value of prayer in developing patience which is an important fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22). Waiting on God is richly rewarding and the congregation must be well informed in line with the scripture (Isaiah 40: 28-31). The congregation needs to know that waiting on God through continuing prayer is what is needed to get justice, and an enduring peace that only a righteous, loving and merciful Father can give. Persistent prayer of the congregation was vital to the harmony and success experienced in the early church in Acts. Our rapidly changing cultures encourage a fast pace environment in which we want things done quickly. We want immediate results. We seem to have allowed our expectations for results to be wired by growing, advanced technological tools (fast pace internet, social media and other online tools) in which with a click of a button we can get what we want within seconds. We do not seem to be prepared to wait anymore. We seem to feel agitated, worried and

discouraged when things do not happen quickly. We seem not to realize that God determines if, when and how a prayer gets answered. We do not teach and emphasize the need to wait on God through prayer. We seem to have allowed the world systems, cultural dynamics to define how we do prayer. “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40: 28-31, NIV)”.

(B) In addition to regular teachings through Bible Study and Sunday School, the leadership can organize special workshops that will serve to remind the congregation about the temporal, future, and eternal value that persistent prayer brings to their faith as well as the risk or danger that prayerlessness poses to the church. The church by its definition and foundation is a congregation of God’s people and must function to nurture the saints in word, prayer and faith. Prayer is for life, not for a season. The notion that we pray only when there are needs negate the biblical principle of persistent prayer illustrated in Luke 18: 1-8 and vividly exemplified by the early church in Acts. The notion of praying only when we have or are in need also sheds light on the principle of praying without truly partnering with God, prayer is a conversation and as such, we are not supposed to

be the only ones talking, we are supposed to listen from God as well, to listen to His promptings and to ask Him what He is doing and what He wants us to do in that particular situation we are praying about. This misunderstanding is what also takes people to pray self-centered prayers and not God-centered prayers. We must abide in Him and be connected to Him and there is no better occasion to do this but during prayer.

(C) The leadership must ensure that everyone in the church is an active participant during prayer meetings by allowing people to join with one another during corporate prayer. The early church in Acts allowed and fostered active participation in prayer by everyone and not just by the leaders alone or a select group of people. Luke 18:1 affirms the indispensability of prayer for every believer in the church. Men have been calling on the Lord right from Genesis 4:26. Because of sinfulness occasioned by the fall, we lost the opportunity to be free of any problems in life and hence all must call on God for help, no exception. The church is God's own vessel to bring the Gospel of light, peace and salvation to every creature in a darkened, hopeless, totally depraved world (Mark 16:15). The church is His body to grow the believers in faith and spiritual maturity as well as prepare the saints for His eschatological kingdom. Persistent prayer is key to actualizing these as demonstrated in the parable of the widow in Luke 18:1-8. The church must pray to the end or till He comes back. The truth is not to encourage congregation to wait until the pastor prays. Pastors can pray and make calls for prayer, but prayer should be seen as the responsibility of all believers in

the church. David wrote in Psalm 62: 1-2 “Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken”. I have seen or heard people spending hours and days in order to see their pastors for prayer. In a congregation of thousands, it is practically impossible for a pastor to pray one on one with members on a regular basis, and so it is the duty of the pastor to teach and equip the congregation to be effective in prayer. Pastors will be encouraging prayerlessness in the church if all they want is for members to be coming to them for regular prayer rather than equipping them to be praying people. The early church grew because the Apostles created an environment whereby every believer was involved in prayer. The leadership should have a prayer room that is accessible to everyone to come in for prayer at any time of the day excluding service times at the church. There should be prayer stations within the prayer room such that people can pick from and pray on specific prayer. Prayer stations can focus on specific prayers such as personal prayer requests, prayer for the church, prayer for missions, prayer for marriage and families, prayer for students and youths, prayer for church’s leadership and workers, and prayer for civil authorities.

(2) The church’s leadership or pastor must lead by example by demonstrating unwavering commitment to a lifestyle of prayer consistent with the culture of prayer shown by the early church’s leaders in Acts 6:4. The church’s leaders in Acts were passionate in corporate and personal prayer, and they passed on this lifestyle of prayer to the congregation. We read from Acts 12: 4-5 that when Peter was imprisoned, the church

prayed without ceasing for him. The Lord intervened speedily; sending an angel to rescue him (Acts 12: 6-11). The pastor as a servant leader must teach prayer to the congregation, preach it and live it. The leadership will lead by example by having designated hours of prayer during week at the sanctuary to pray for the needs of the church. We see in Acts 3: 1 that Peter and John were faithful to the hour of prayer. Additionally, the pastor can join with other ministers in the community to form a daily or a weekly prayer line to pray for families, the community, the nation and the civil authorities.

(3) Practice of regular mid-week prayer meetings by everyone in the church and not just for a select group of people. While most if not all churches have regular mid-week Bible Studies, the same cannot be said of congregational prayer meetings. The elements of a mid-week prayer can consist of worship/songs, confession, reading from the Scripture, message on prayer, and breaking into small groups of two or three to pray for one another. A mid week prayer meeting can last about 90 minutes.

(4) Practice of congregational prayer following Sunday worship or sermon will help develop and promote congregation's interest in persistent prayer. People need to see prayer as a way of life, and only through opportunities for active participation in prayer at weekly meetings, Sunday services, small group meetings and other activities can this be effectively accomplished. Most people tend to come to church on Sundays and so setting aside ten minutes congregational prayer following worship will be helpful. Immediately after sermon, people should be encouraged to stay 10 to 15 minutes to pray. The Sunday bulletin should contain prayer requests that people can pray on.

(5) Practice of bi-annual prayer retreats by all groups in the church (men, women, youths, children, married couples, singles, professionals, workers and ministers). The retreats should be designed to teach and develop people for a lifestyle of prayer that speaks to the teachings of Christ in Luke 18 as well as to the prayer life of the early church in Acts. A bi-annual prayer retreat can be held outside the church in a camp ground and can last for three days. The church can solicit participation from other ministers outside the church to speak to the congregation on a theme that revolves around persistent prayer. In addition to teachings on prayer, the elements of a bi-annual retreat can consist of small groups' prayer meetings, separate prayer sessions for different groups in the church such as the youths, adults, men, women, married couples, singles, ministers and other workers. The congregation can also be encouraged to observe a day of fasting during the retreat to practice spiritual discipline.

(6) Practice of weekly or monthly night prayers by the congregation will also be helpful. People that may not be able to attend week day prayer activities due to work may have time for late night or all night prayer meetings. An all night Friday prayer meeting can start from midnight and end at 6 am on Saturday. The elements of an all night prayer meeting can consist of worship through spiritual songs and hymns, confession, reading from Scripture, sharing of testimonies, messages on prayer and various prayer sessions to pray for families, the church, the nation, people in need of healing and deliverance, salvation for the lost, overseas missionaries, and spiritual growth of one another in the body of Christ.

(7) Appropriate use of social media tools (Skype, Google +) to encourage godly networking and interactions through prayer by members of the church. The intent is to create opportunities for every congregant to be committed to a lifestyle of persistent prayer. Using Social Media can also be beneficial to engage the younger members of the congregation, teaching them that Social Media can be used to bring Glory to God and to connect with believers in order to accomplish the Great Commission. Through the use of social media, the church can send out instant prayer requests and mobilize people to pray where they are without having to wait till people come to church for prayer. Teachings and Bible verses that encourage prayer can be sent to people through the social media. People can also join with one another to pray through Skype or Google +

(8) Encouraging the congregation to share with one another during Sunday services and other church's meetings personal stories of success in persistent, prevailing prayer of faith. Peter shared his story with the church in Acts 12: 16-17. Stories can be powerful and inspiring and help people appreciate the importance of growing intimacy with the Lord through a dedicated life of prayer consistent with Luke 18.

(9) Development of prayer resources such as manuals to help the congregation with overcoming prayer shortcomings. People at times do not know how to pray or words to use and so a church prayer manual drawn from the Psalms and other scriptural passages that speak about the attributes of God and stories of His deliverance through prayer, supplication and thanksgiving will be helpful. For instance a prayer manual for the blessing of the congregation can contain words such as "Dear Lord, we ask that you be gracious to us and cause your face to shine on us - so that your ways may be known on

earth, your salvation among the nations. Let our land yields its harvest and bless us o Lord so that we can praise you and all the ends of the earth will fear you” (Psalm 67: 1-7). Prayer manuals should provide words and appropriate Bible verses that can assist people to pray effectively. Prayer manuals can contain prayers for healing for the sick, comfort and support for the bereaved, provisions for the singles and married, God’s deliverance from evil, success in an examination, grace and courage during a difficult and challenging situation, grace to live the spirit-filled life, grace to live the sanctified life, victory in affliction and other issues of life that people contend with daily. The church can enlist the service of an experienced prayer consultant to help develop prayer resources that can be used during prayer meetings, retreats, small groups fellowship at homes and through social medial tools such Skype and Google +.

(10) The church must have a long term vision for growth that will require active congregational involvement in prayer. The church must see that every internal activity and outreach meetings start and end with a time of quality prayer in God’s presence. The vision for the early church birthed and flourished through a congregational approach to prayer. Prayer was a collective responsibility and the church grew in response to the faithful, unceasing prayer of the congregation. However, the main goal of developing a lifestyle of prayer should not be to increase the size of the church. The main goal should be to develop a dependency to God that will strengthen our spiritual life and our ability to see what the Father is doing.

In the light of all of the above, two scenarios of growth can happen depending on how well and often the church prays. In the first conceptual model for church

growth shown in Figure 1A, the church can grow exponentially and sustain this through time as typical of the early church in Acts. The growth of a praying church like the early church may not necessarily be linear at the very beginning or during pioneering since considerable amount of time need to be spent waiting on the Lord for direction and power or strength from the Holy Spirit. Consequently, one would expect an exponential growth, which of course will peak over time and continue through sustained, collective prayer of the congregation. Growth in this context implies spiritual, physical and numerical growth as exemplified by the early church in Acts 2: 42-47, 4:4, 6:12, and 9:3. The early church started with 120 believers (Acts 1:15, and grew to 3000 (Acts 2:40). Because of their commitment to constant prayer, the church kept growing numerically on a daily basis to the extent that they reached 5000 within a short period of time (Acts 4:4). They had cultural differences and challenges (Acts 2: 1-40, 6: 1-3), they were intensely persecuted for their faith and commitment to Matthew 28: 18-20 and Acts 1:8, but they survived and flourished through prayer. The entire congregation was always raising their voices to God in prayer. They started as a single church and grew in numbers as a result of commitment to unceasing prayer. Acts 9: 31 reads: “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers” (New International Version).

The second conceptual model for growth (Figure 1B) is one in which the church may have started with the right vision and enthusiasm but with less or no

emphasis on prayer. Over time, the church regresses resulting in a decline. This scenario likely models the Church in Sardis in Revelation 3: 1-3 that was admonished to “wake up” by the Master, as well as the Church in Laodicea that is neither cold nor hot (Revelation 3: 14-19). A growth characterized by initial progression and later retrogression (Figure 1B) is not what Christ intends for His church. A church lacking stability as a result of prayerlessness risks susceptibility to decline (Figure 1B).

Moreover, how we pray as a congregation must reflect the critical elements of a prevailing prayer exemplified in Luke 18 and modeled by the early church in Acts. The elements of a prevailing prayer (based on Luke 18) are persistency, penitence, determination, patience, authenticity, sincere repentance towards God and total trust in God’s grace, mercy and sufficiency. The popular altar/pulpit based approach to prayer in which only the pastor or an elder does the prayer and the rest of the congregation remains silence is not good for the spiritual health of the church.

The attitude and character of the widow in Luke 18 are what the church needs to overcome prayerlessness. The church’s prayer must be kingdom-focused, and centered on God’s will (Luke 11: 1-5). Our prayer must seek for God’s deliverance from evil (Luke 11:4), helplessness and hopelessness associated with a fallen, depraved world. Of course the Lord delights in our prosperity, but it is not His wish that we do not enjoy His daily provisions. In the Lord’s Prayer, immediately following daily provision is the prayer for God’s deliverance from evil (Luke 11:4). Nations today spend billions of dollars to fight terrorism, injustice and protection of human rights, but through persistent prayer of the church the nations may be free of terrorism. Consequently, part of the funds

spent on counter-terrorism may be channeled to activities that will aid educational and socio-economic growth of the community of which the church is a critical part. Unlike the enemy that has come to steal, kill and destroy Christ has come to give us life and life more abundantly (John 10:10). In His eschatological return, He is not coming for a faithless church or for a church in spiritual decline but for a faithful, prayerful church (Luke 18:8).

In conclusion, unceasing congregational and individual prayer is what is lacking in today's church. This needs to be taught, encouraged, promoted and faithfully practiced to ensure an effective and a sustainable growth of a local church both corporately and individually.

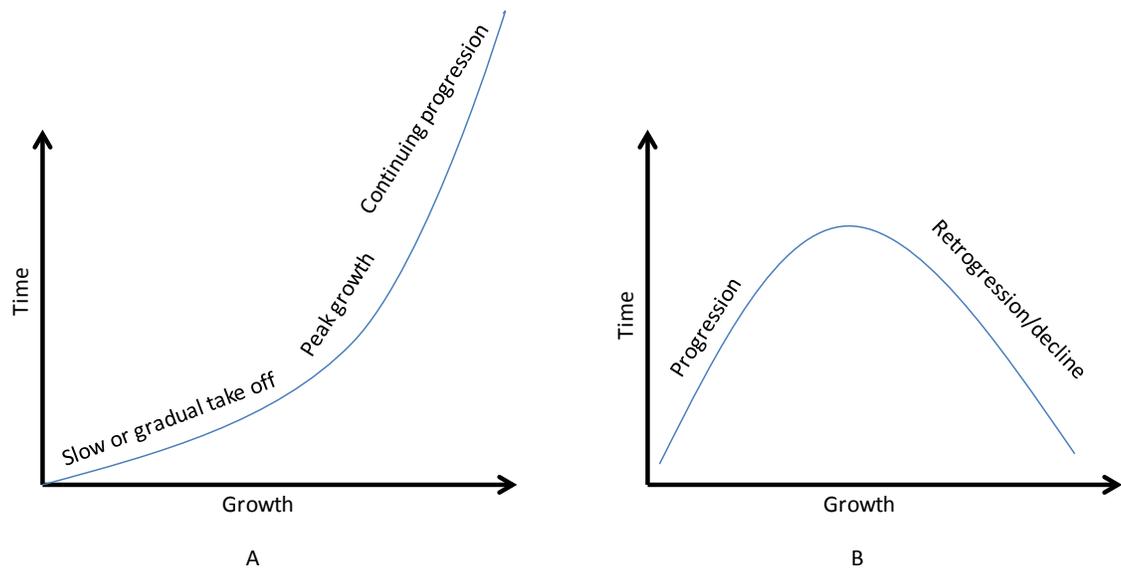


Figure 1: (A) an exponential church growth typical of the praying church in Acts, (B) a church in progression risks retrogression if prayerlessness persists for a long time

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The modern Church's rapid growth in areas throughout the world has created many challenges in administering such a vast area while still nurturing the individual. There are thus many examples of organizational changes that have allowed the Church to expand globally yet continue to assist members on a more local level. One great example of diverse cultures united under Christ, according to President Marion G. Romney and others, is BYU-Hawaii, which serves as a microcosm of the growing international Church, with the majority of the students coming from over seventy countries studying and worshipping together.

5 Prayer and the Early Church  
Introduction – Prayer in Acts builds upon and/or coheres to Jesus' perspective on prayer in Luke – Over 30 times Christ's followers in Acts are shown in prayer or the narrative refers to prayer. Most of these occurrences are found in the first half of Acts – setting a pattern.

6 Prayer's Role in the Early Church  
Prayer – a foundational lifestyle and relationship that was employed for the evangelistic mission (Acts 2:42) Prayer paved the way for bold and fruitful proclamation of the gospel (Acts 4:23-33) Prayer provided the environment for the Holy Spirit to in