

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

Note: The substance of this Article first appeared in Moot Point, CRI Pack, Ref. 87/4: '*Prayer Meetings: Are They Valid?*' (1987)

. The original article included discussion points, comments and questions. These have now been incorporated into Course SBT/3. Readers should understand that the prayer meetings being referred to are those whole meetings given over to prayer, as they are today. The article is NOT critical of prayer itself, or of spontaneous prayer meetings where all those who pray speak with 'one accord' (discussed later).

The existence and validity of prayer meetings is taken for granted. Yet, of all meetings the prayer meeting is probably the least attended. Independent Protestant churches insist that the prayer meeting is the very core, or hub, of local church life. Without it, they say, the local church would die.

It is very easy for pastors to publicly blame the laxity of the flock, or the state of the world in general, because the prayer meeting is not attended. But, perhaps this is merely an excuse! Does a pastor have the right to pass-on blame in this way? Over the past several years this writer has questioned the whole matter and the validity of 'corporate prayer' **as we have it today** in our local churches. It is a matter of intense personal importance. After almost 30 years (2016 note: the figure is now 52 years) of being a Believer and of dutifully attending prayer meetings, I ask these questions:

"What exactly is a prayer meeting FOR?"

What is its purpose?

Is it an authentic - and therefore valid - activity?"

Let us face these questions with honesty. If we can answer them, we may yet see life in near-dead churches. Without honesty, our churches become heavy with unbiblical traditions, like a small boat encrusted with barnacles. Sooner or later it will sink lower in the sea of spiritual life, until it is washed this way and that, like an old tin tub, by increasing tides of mere opinion,

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

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Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

until it sinks without trace.

A COMPLEX QUESTION

If the majority of Christians are honest, the prayer meeting is usually the most boring and fruitless of meetings. In my own Christian life I must have attended all kinds of 'corporate' prayer meetings - thousands of them. I have attended other types of prayer meetings, too. Also, I have prayed in all kinds of denominational structures... Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Brethren... just about every kind of Protestant group you can name.

Some prayer meetings are more lively than others. But, 'liveliness' does not necessarily constitute validity, or truth, or holiness. How we *feel* about particular prayer meetings is irrelevant to our argument. The fact that some may emerge from such meetings feeling wonderful has nothing at all to do with the questions being asked. To put it bluntly,

Satan

can make us feel wonderful. What matters is God's word, NOT how we 'feel' about an issue. Thankfully, we can experience feelings of true joy during and after prayer. This is not disputed. However,

true

feelings can only follow

true

prayer, not the false prayers that are the subject of this Article (which often produce euphoric *happiness*, not Biblical joy).

The sad truth is this - in *all* but a very small number of cases, I *cannot remember* ever knowing a real satisfaction in such meetings. That is a hard fact and a tender spot to touch. Critics could retort that this is my own fault.

But, is it?

Could it be that the lack of joy was due to my practice of something that was not scripturally valid? This implies, of course, that most Christians are misled about prayer - another serious statement. If that is true, it does not imply that these Christians are fools or that their pastors are evil. No, it simply means that some have not yet reached a point at which they can see their error. After all, I

practised

and taught

exactly the same things for many years, advising Believers to do the same. Now, I publicly denounce my error and I pass on the findings of a Biblical examination of the topic. The aim is to help build the Church of Christ, of which we are all brethren, in strength and vitality. To continue in error will do the opposite.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

I have met with those who claim to 'enjoy' every prayer meeting they attend. All I can say is that they should beware of psychological factors that can easily mask the truth. To 'enjoy' a sermon, or a prayer meeting, or a book, etc., is not necessarily proof of its Biblical truth. There can be many reasons why we 'enjoy' something. Quite often, we enjoy those things with which we concur! Enjoyment of meetings is not barred, but neither is it necessarily a proof of spiritual reality. Nor does it mean our encounter with God is unchallenging. Again, the easiest thing for a pastor to now do, is to blame the writer for these failings!

This would be a mistake. Such meetings have never prevented me from praying inwardly (2016 note: I no longer attend them). I often meet God in this way, despite the coldness of the meeting itself. (On many occasions there is humanly-generated 'warmth' and fervour, but this is not Holy Spirit warmth). It could be said that I am merely expressing spiritual laxity or the signs of a backslidden state. The challenge for the critic is to show me where I am in Biblical error. If such error is not forthcoming, then the problem must be elsewhere. Yes, hard talk - but the answer is *not*

to apportion blame simply because one does not like the questions and statements. Don't shoot the messenger! (Note: The Evangelical Times reviewed the article and agreed with almost all of it – but could not identify what they said they disagreed with).

Many Christians enjoy the 'first half' of a prayer meeting, which is usually a Bible study. But, they are not so keen on the second half (the supposed 'prayer' part). The people who say this are often sincere Believers: it is simplistic and derogatory to label them (or myself) 'backsliders'.

The question being raised is not an academic exercise. Nor is it trite or ill-conceived. It emerges from a background of wrestling in (and with) prayer in great depth. It has to be that way, for we are told that prayer meetings are the '*very core*' or '*the power-house*' of a local church. Thus, it has to be central in our lives and it must challenge us all. We must not hide from the issue, but must deal with it. Whenever a Jehovah's Witness has doubts or awkward questions, the leader will advise him to read more JW books and to sell more literature. In this way, he is assured, the doubts will go away. It is like this in Christian churches, too. Awkward questions are ignored or treated as evidence of declining spirituality.

For this reason, most Christians will never ask the questions (publicly) in the first place, nor will they ever admit to their doubts. They are too afraid of 'consequences'. This leads to the classic '*evangelical smile*' where what is

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

inside

a man is

not

what is seen on the outside. Another word for this is
'hypocrisy'.

For this reason, too, most Christians resort to clichés. They hide behind them. Indeed, we are not expected to question our beliefs or those traditions handed down over centuries. Clichés provide a superficial comfort and a barrier against disapproving fellow Believers. Just smile and say '*Praise the Lord*' and all is well! But, how is that different from brainwashing? The comfort evaporates in private, because it is superficial and doubts or fears grow without an outlet. This does not strengthen our faith, but weakens and almost destroys it.

Continuous questions *can* sometimes be a sign of unbelief. They can also be the sign of a sincere seeking after the Truth of Christ and real spiritual life. These questions are being asked for the sake of the well-being of the saints, not for sheer mischief value. All traditions must stand or fall on their own strengths or weaknesses. No tradition is beyond Biblical scrutiny. Traditions that cannot pass this test must be thrown out. It just so happens that the prayer meeting is now the tradition under scrutiny.

Coming from a Welsh Baptist/Calvinistic background, I know that my questions will alarm those with a similar history. Seeking the Truth can often cause disquiet. When deep-seated opinions are challenged, questions concerning their validity are perceived to be a threat. But, opinions are not the same as Biblical Truth. So, to question them is not to question the Truth. Truth remains, whether we question it or not; whether we believe it or not. I question opinions, not biblical truth.

The topic of prayer meetings is now being discussed. This is disturbing. It is also a complicated issue - but it need not be complex. Like so many issues in life, we can always find ways to make them ultra-complex! When things we have done for years are questioned, the questions are viewed as a threat, even if no threat actually exists. There is only a 'problem' if that is the way we prefer to think of the matter. On the other hand, what one sees as a 'problem' will be, to others, a situation to be faced and dealt with. Thus, they are *challenges*, not threats.

Honest Believers, including pastors, will admit that prayer meetings are a difficult thing to deal with. It is far easier to just carry on holding them! But, *what* is wrong with them (for something is

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

definitely wrong)? Is it to do with the format? Or, is something *fundamentally*

wrong? Does the membership of the local church reflect the state of the prayer meeting... or does the prayer meeting reflect the state of the membership? Or, does the prayer meeting reflect the desires of Man and not of God? Are these not important issues?

For too many years, Christians in the West have lived off past glories, almost like carrion crows. We pick at the flesh of our dead spiritual forefathers, hoping that this will fill us with like passions and spiritual greatness. Most of us feed off our forefather's greatness. We fail to sow our own crops in our own day and rely on stories of spiritual giants, pretending that *their* triumphs are our own. (Which is why sermons are often packed with references to the past and not the present).

We continue in activities passed down like worn clothing through our denominational history. (Most denominationalists treat their denominations almost like political parties requiring total loyalty). But, how often do we question them? How often do we test the spirits to see whether they be of God? Because God worked mightily in men in *their* day, it does not mean He will remain in the *same* activities if we continue them *today*

. We cannot live our lives according to an historic pattern, unless it comes direct from God and His word. Also, what was good for men of one era may not be good for a man of today (we are not here referring to Biblical truths, which prevail through all ages).

It is our duty to be constantly alert to these dangers. God worked great works through great men in the history of the Church, but Christians today miss an important fact - **the local church** (which is but a microcosm of the Church universal)

is only as alive and as pure as its oldest living member.

In other words, the spiritual state of *any*

local church depends entirely and solely on its *current*

state and not on its past glories. That is, it is

only as Christian as its present members!

The father may have been a giant of spiritual virtues - but the son may well be an evildoer of the worst type. Also, a whole denomination is only as holy and as Christian as its present membership and biblical adherence. We cannot live off the purity and holiness of others in the past.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

Yet this is exactly what we attempt to do if we refuse to question our dearest traditions. They *may* be doctrinally justified. But, maybe they are not. How do we know if we never face them?

A TYPICAL PRAYER MEETING

It seems that corporate prayer meeting is possible only between 7.30pm and 8.30pm on one mid-week evening (or whatever other times and days are chosen) - except where 'prayer' is used as a 'power' tool for dubious purposes (e.g. charismatic meetings)! Let us remind ourselves of what a typical prayer meeting is like...

Enter the room. Sometimes it is cosy and warm; sometimes it is cold and uncomfortable (some say this is 'more spiritual'). Few people are there compared to the actual numbers on the membership list. Everyone sits in his or her usual place (often with dark looks from regulars who like certain seats that are sat on by others).

The meeting comes to order and, predictably, there is a 'sandwich' of opening prayer by the pastor, a hymn or chorus, a reading, another hymn... well, you know what I mean. Some/most prayer meetings are mixed with Bible studies. In essence it is a Sunday service, except that the men dress more casually! (Why do this? What makes one day a 'suit and tie' day and another day more casual? Even TV presenters do the same thing. Does our dress really express our intent? Or, is this just another tradition? If dress is an expression of intent, then I must be the worst backslider of them all... but I cannot *afford* new clothes, or even a suit. Does that make a difference?).

We finally get to the 'prayer' section. Again, there is usually a format or style. This might be determined by the pastor and, because they want to be approved by him, members follow this format or style. (In itself this implies they see the pastor as a manager or 'boss'). They do this even if they do not agree with it, or if they do not like it, or if they feel uncomfortable about it. Sometimes the 'style' depends on denominational requirements. Hence the stark contrast between, say, High-Anglican 'prayers' and those in an evangelical, Independent chapel.

There is no reason or excuse to ignore these questions. What you think is what you are. If you secretly think these things - then ask the questions! Think of this next time you 'pray' just because your pastor says so, or because it is 'your turn'. God sees us as we really are and He knows if we pray out of expectation or duty (He does not listen to these falsities). He knows if we should really pray or not, regardless of what the pastor or our fellow members think! Beware

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

of hypocrisy. Pray in public ONLY if you are led to do so (and such incidences should be very rare) - do not dare to open your mouth otherwise.

And so the prayers start... or *are* they prayers, REAL prayers? Occasionally there are impassioned pleas by some who rarely pray. But, most prayers are said by the same people, who often use exactly the same words and language (or clichés) and the same format in EVERY prayer meeting... first a bit about God Himself, then something about the local church, quickly followed by pleas for the whole Church. Perhaps, then, a request for the sick and the persecuted. It is all standard stuff.

Some prayers are flowery. Some are quick and plain. Some are fluent. I am not saying that each of these is necessarily hypocritical. No - I am asking if they are of *value*. I am asking if they are truly of God. If they are not, then what are they for? Remember - a prayer that has not been prompted by God Himself is a form of lie. I cannot accept that most of these prayers are OF God and FOR God and FROM God, because they appear to be vain repetition or just dutiful shows of 'worship' without substance.

So, the regulars keep the prayer meeting going. I hear them utter real, heart-felt pleas. This does not necessarily make them true prayers. They may be perfectly phrased and contain everything expected of them. This is partly why I question them! It is as if we write our own version of the Lord's Prayer and stick to it! Every week we use the same ideas and formula, with just a small change here and there. Essentially, though, they are always the same set of phrases and format-words. This is never intended, but it always happens. I know because I did it for several decades, but with inner dismay at my own inner lack of strength!

Do we realise that we pray mainly because others expect us to do so? Because the pastor is listening? Or, worse - because he has *asked* us to pray and we know very well that we were not even *thinking* about praying? Do you pray because otherwise others will think you are backsliding? Or, do you pray publicly because you enjoy it, or because you have an outgoing personality (like the deacon who lay flat on his face, body outstretched, shouting great phrases of passion)? There can be many reasons for praying out loud, and none of them are of the Lord. Remember what the Lord said about the Pharisees who insisted on praying in public? Are YOU trying to elongate your garments to appear superior to men (whether you realise it or not)? Are you willing to question your motives?

PRAYER CONTENT

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

What do prayers really say? Is there a purpose behind them (in a prayer meeting, that is), or, are they forgotten once said, because they are just for the public and not from the heart? Only on rare occasions have I come from a prayer meeting with the distinct impression that something spiritual has happened. Needless to say, such occasions have always followed my own bouts of inward, secret, personal prayers. They have rarely arisen from the meeting itself. At these meetings my prayers were almost invariably silent. When I did finally pray out loud it was often the result of 'psyching myself up' because I 'ought' to pray. In other words, they were false prayers. So, the prayer meeting itself made no difference, and I *know* that all this will strike a chord of recognition in many readers.

Pastors should research this matter: are the feelings in a prayer meeting to do with spiritual movements within one's own heart - or do they arise from group encouragement, fostered by psychological factors? *Exactly* the same process makes a cohesive group out of soccer fans. Are these signs of God's prompting? We all take too much for granted: have we ever wondered if our 'marvellous prayer times' in public are really of God? Or, are they products of human phenomena?

A 'sincere' prayer is not itself proof of spirituality or of a true spiritual motive. On the other hand, *no prayer at all* is not necessarily a sign of backsliding. Many people who are heretics or apostate can 'pray' fluently and with great passion. Yet, their prayers are of Satan or of their own minds. The fact that prayers sound 'balanced' (how I dislike that idea!) makes no difference, either. What sounds a beautiful offering to us, may be a stench in the nostrils of an Holy God. The vilest of men can sound good in prayer. So, if a pastor, or anyone else, judges a man's Christian state by the content, construction, or presentation of his public prayers, there is something seriously wrong.

Similarly, I have heard pastors boast that they can "*know a man from his bookshelf*". It seems to me that every man is an amateur psychologist - I defy anyone to 'know' me from my bookshelf! It is about time that Christians stopped using this phrase and 'method'. I have even witnessed pastors snooping in a person's (and my own) bookshelf so as to form their opinion of him. Thus, the pastor bases his whole perception of a man on a browse through his books!

This is dangerous practice; on my shelf there are Mormon 'bibles', Hindu holy books, reports on pornography, letters from homosexuals; I can hazard a guess as to the perception *some* would have of me! All they would see are the titles - they would not bother to ask me why I have them. I know this is true, because it has happened. To me, all non-Bible books are only for reference and practical study purposes. I have no time for novels, for the time is short. But, if all you 'see'

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

of me are the titles, then my good reputation (if I have one) is lost!

In the same way, listening to a man's prayers cannot be an accurate way to sum up his spiritual state. Of course, good men can pray good prayers - I am merely saying that we must be careful; silence in a prayer meeting does not mean someone is backsliding and 'sound' prayers do not guarantee high spirituality. Let me put it in the cold light of day - I know of *pastors* who have prayed 'soundly' in public just hours before beating up their wives or when they are in an adulterous relationship! People can pretend in any sphere of life, whether the pretence is 'spiritual' or not.

I rarely pray in public, in a prayer meeting (2016 note: mainly, today, because I no longer attend them). I certainly never appreciate being *told* to pray. Yet, if I *take* a meeting, I am willing to pray (although there have been one or two exceptions). Leading in prayer on behalf of the congregation is well-documented in scripture. It is not the same as the kind of prayers spoken in corporate prayer meetings, or in private. At such times my prayers are short and only what I perceive to be apt. A congregation will get no flowery long speeches dressed as 'prayer'!

In a prayer meeting I am very aware of being in front of God Himself - as I am *anywhere* at *all* times. People claim to come together with the express purpose of speaking directly to God. Therefore, I am very, very careful. This is why I rarely pray in public. Although all churches insist on this public, generalised, getting-together to pray, there is no real point to it. It is relatively easier for some to pray in public, when everybody is doing it (group dynamics again). But, is the result 'prayer'?

I remember the times I have responded emotionally to the prayers of others, even though I am not the easiest of persons to respond in this way. Indeed, I am known for the control I exert over my emotions. Now, if I can respond emotionally - what about the thousands who *easily* respond emotionally? They will quickly 'join in' the emotionally-charged situation and become a part of it. Many, many Christians respond emotionally and not spiritually. This is observable.

Many Christians base their beliefs on their emotions. This can be witnessed when things they cherish the most are challenged or upset - it is then that their *real* beliefs (or not) can be seen in action. It is when we reach our weakest points that we see if our beliefs stand the test, or if they are just superficial.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

In prayer meetings, I often used to pray silently with others who were praying. That is, I mentally repeated what was said. But, how valid is this? We all do it, but is it acceptable to God? Later we will look at praying with '*one accord*'... but, the example above is *not* praying with one accord! Can I be so busy hearing and repeating, that I do not have time to digest and understand? Can I legitimately 'borrow' the prayers of others and apply them to myself (i.e. the 'carrion crow' syndrome mentioned earlier)?

Whenever I left prayer meetings I always took out what I took in - my own fears and doubts, my own requests and my own private pleas to God. There is no way I could have shared these thoughts with others. More importantly - God does not want us to do that, either.

MORE QUESTIONS

What has been said above are the thoughts of countless Believers, but they dare not articulate them. Are they all lax or backslidden? I doubt it very much. If prayer meetings *should* exist, then we must ask several pertinent questions:

1.

Should they exist on a regular basis?

2.

Should they be convened for special reasons only?

3.

Should they exist as separate from other meetings or as part of them? And should these other meetings be regular (i.e. repetitive) anyway?

4.

Should public prayers be made only at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, when necessary? (If so, then we must all learn what 'prompting' really is! So often, we attribute something to the Holy Spirit, when it is no such thing).

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

There are many more questions.

I find it difficult to understand, you see, how prayers can be 'ordered' for one hour on one weeknight (except for public holidays!). To me, this is *superstition* and not praise or prayer, but a command to God to appear at the times we state. When I once suggested to a good friend that the prayer meeting should be discarded, his appalled retort was

"But if we do that, what else can we put in its place?"

That was no answer at all! When I replied

"Nothing"

he just disagreed and walked off!

Why

should something replace the prayer meeting, if it should not exist anyway? It is a very mechanistic way to live a Christian life.

This attitude treats prayer as though it were something apart from life; as something one only does at certain times (as in Islam and Roman Catholicism). It does not comprehend what true prayer is, or the constant communion (in all its variety) we must have with God. I have walked around my home chatting to God in prayer, complete with nods of the head and waving of my arms, as though walking next to a person. That's because He *is* 'walking' next to me! I have exclaimed just one word in an emergency, because there has been no time for anything else.

There have also been even *more* critical times when I have been unable to think straight because of a pressing situation: in these times the Holy Spirit promises to step in and mediate on our behalf, saying those things we cannot speak. Thus, prayer need not be vocal and need not be known in terms of thoughts, when God accepts prayers we are not aware of sending. This is when our spirit communes directly with the Holy Spirit. (Read Romans). Yes, prayer takes on many forms - some unknown to many Christians.

Prayers-to-order are not true prayers and have no worth, except as human therapy. Yet, Christians are made to feel inferior if they cannot muster prayers at a prayer meeting. Many do not attend for this very reason; they feel intimidated. (Pastors and leaders may not *intend* to make people feel this way, but they nevertheless do so by inference). Others may attend because it gives a feeling of spiritual superiority. Again, this may not be the intention, but it is certainly projected. This all suggests that 'prayer' can be a magical rite or a social norm. It is definitely not open and honest communion with God.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

CORPORATE PRAYER

I could be wrong, but in all the Biblical references to 'prayer' and to similar words (pray, etc.), I cannot find substantial - or even flimsy - evidence to support prayer meetings *as we know them today*. There is much evidence for prayers being used *as a part of other activities*, though. The overall picture seems to be that of individuals talking *privately* to God: their prayers being *first prompted by God*. Thus, anything else must be sheer garble.

In prayer, as in any other spiritual activity, there is no such thing as a 'cavalier' action - we cannot just 'have a go', or 'try our best'. The suggestion that "*We should just start to say something and the Lord will fill our mouths*" is not Biblical (in this context). The idea is not mature and it ignores the mind and the spirit. It forgets that the devil would just love us to simply 'open our mouths', for he has plenty to fill them with! It is a mindless activity: if we rely on it we may as well rely on Christmas Cracker verses, or those boxes of ready Bible texts where we pick one out at random and tell ourselves that God is speaking to us! No, all this is spiritual deadwood. It sends us toward Satan or spiritual obscurity, not toward God.

A prayer is real only if it is first given to us by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise it must be either of ourselves or of Satan. If it is *not* of God, then He will not listen to us. 'Having-a-go' has no place in the Christian life, whether in prayer or in any other activity (e.g. door-to-door work, witnessing, etc.).

I simply do not understand what our churches *mean* by 'corporate prayer'. And, I suspect, *neither do they*! I know what I have been *told* it is and what I have *read* about it in books. That is as far as it goes. I have no firm Biblical understanding of it from scripture, which is why I am so suspicious of it today. We all refer to it and all talk about it and many of us do it. But, very few of us have *thought*

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

about it or tested the spirits. We accept the existence of prayer meetings because we have always done so and for no other reason.

In scripture (the AV) seven words directly refer to the subject:

Pray, Prayer, Prayest, Prayeth, Praying, Prayed, Prayers.

Together, these words appear 510 times in the Old and the New Testaments combined. A breakdown of their uses is given later. (There are *other* references to prayer that do not use these actual words, but these also appear to follow the same pattern).

We must never pick out texts that 'prove' our beliefs and reject those that do not. We must see if the meanings of texts are supported by other texts, or if these other texts *oppose* the meaning we have given them. Apart from that, we must also check the whole ethos of the Bible. This gives us the atmosphere or setting of our texts. That is, their context. In all this I find nothing to support modern-day ideas of corporate prayer.

What, then, do we base prayer meetings on? Yes, there are texts that speak of getting together to pray, but these texts *do not* support the use of modern-day prayer meetings.

The majority of uses for the word 'pray' are found in the Old Testament and these uses have nothing at all to do with *our* idea of 'prayer'! Instead, it is used as an ordinary form of greeting. There are rare exceptions to this. *At no time* did it refer to prayer-communications between a group, or between a group and God. It is hard to see how personal prayer can be 'shared' corporately. Even a public prayer made on behalf of the congregation by a pastor is not a personal or a corporate prayer, but is a *formalised* prayer, *representative* of the congregation.

BIBLICAL WARRANT

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

An example of texts that refer to prayer but that do not use any of the usual seven words referred to above, is found in 2 Chronicles 20. This is typical of prayer made by a leader *on behalf of*

(not corporately with) the people. It cannot, then, be used as evidence in support of corporate prayer. There are many more examples like this. Most Biblical examples of praying refer to prayer made on behalf of others, or made in private for a very special purpose.

So where, then, is our Biblical warrant for prayer meetings? There is certainly no direct evidence of commands to meet together for corporate prayers in the form we now have them. In scripture, texts that tell of prayer between God and a man usually assume a highly personal form, such as 'beseeching' or 'pleading'. This cannot be done, week after week, in a roomful of people whose spiritual states and temperatures differ so widely from hot to near-freezing! How can wayward hearts possibly 'join in' the true prayer of an earnest heart? It is not possible. Nor can a personal, earnest prayer be shared.

WONDERFUL TIMES ARE NOT PROOF

A reader could retort that he has had 'wonderful times' in prayer meetings. I cannot deny that, of course (though I can question the details). But, having a 'wonderful time' is not necessarily proof that something is of God. People have a 'wonderful time' getting drunk, or of being high on drugs, or by indulging in orgies of illicit sex, or even killing people! Satan can counterfeit anything, including having 'wonderful times' in prayer meetings, and even prayer itself.

Another problem I have with corporate meetings is the way the Holy Spirit is 'called down'. All of us who preach have done this at one time or another, almost as a matter of course. We have all prayed for "*The Holy Spirit to come down amongst us*". If you think about it, this is nothing more than ordering God around for our own convenience and is akin to the 'calling down' of Christ by Roman Catholic priests during the Mass. It also neglects the fact that the Holy Spirit is *already*

in each one who is saved. To say that He 'comes down' (and by implication, goes 'back up' again) is not theological or biblical truth. (If something is not truth, what is it? Yes, it is a lie).

It is true that we feel the presence of God more keenly at certain times. This, however, is more a sign of our *spiritual awareness* and spiritual state than of the Holy Spirit 'coming down'. He is always with us, even when we do not realise it. Otherwise, we are *really*

saying that God is NOT WITH US, except in prayer meetings when He is 'called down'. There are serious flaws in the act and attitude of 'calling down' the Holy Spirit. And it is Romanistic.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

In the past I have been in meetings (particularly those very large American-evangelism, or Pentecostal-type meetings) where it has been claimed that the Holy Spirit "*moved in a mighty way*", but where I

was distinctly

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moved! How can this be explained? By going back to the old 'backslider' charge? No - let us question things more closely, such as the hyping of the audience.

Anticipation is heightened and emotional excitement is fostered by use of music and carefully constructed speech, and even use of a variety of tones, to subdue or to excite. Ever tried 'proving' that Father Christmas visits children? It is fairly easy to convince them that Santa is on the roof... hear the bells? Hear the clatter of reindeer hooves on the roof? Hear the soot falling down the chimney? Oh, look! There goes the sleigh in the night sky... see it kids? Yes, they *do* see it... there it goes... wow! Such is their expectation, they actually 'see' the sleigh and 'hear' its sounds! They believe it happened because you have carefully built up their expectations.

When similar tactics are used in large meetings, I have no time for them. If God is there, then He is there - no need for hype or emotional charging! It is strange that some 'feel' the so-called Presence of God at these meetings whilst others, sincere Christians, do not. To claim it is due to their coldness of heart is not sufficient, or fair. On the Day of Pentecost the room the disciples were in *shook* with God's Presence! Things were blown about by the wind accompanying His Presence. There was no mistake about it, it was so obvious. Yet, power-preachers insist that the Holy Spirit 'comes down' in a mighty way amongst us - yet leaving many untouched? This is not acceptable.

Satan can invent a spiritual response in us (particularly if we never question what happens). I am sure that this is what happened in those meetings I attended, where the name of Jesus was chanted again and again, like an Hindu mantra. Then, after this repetition, 'He comes down'! This is credulity stretched beyond normal limits. It is nothing less than auto-suggestion/self-hypnotism dressed in dubious 'spiritual' clothing. At such times I feel the chill of evil in the air. This can happen in the most sincere of Christian meetings, so even a prayer meeting must be discerned.

Feelings have their place in worship and in prayer, but they must never rule these activities. Unless the feelings are direct from God, they prevent true prayer taking place, substituting emotions for prayer. It is better to be silent than to 'pray' a non-prayer under the guise of public

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

prayer.

The greatest giants in Christianity have all spoken of the toughness of prayer and of their inner traumas when praying. Personally, I do not understand those who say it is 'so easy' to pray. Yet, many Christians today say they always 'enjoy' prayer as though it were some sort of game or TV film. They have a prayer for every occasion, tailor-made. This is a danger pastors should watch out for, because a prayer is 'always' done at a particular point or for a particular event, it does NOT mean we must *always* pray. A holy silence is better than wrongful prayer in public. I am always wary of those who find it 'easy' to pray. It should be repeated - Satan is a Master-Counterfeiter!

DOES INTENT MATTER?

In law, much depends on the intent of the accused. If he is found guilty of a crime his intent does not absolve him from the penalty, but it can affect the extent and the severity of the penalty. It can sometimes lead to a dismissal of the penalty or the giving of some other judgement of mercy. However, he is guilty whether or not he intended to commit the crime.

Does this principle apply here? Does the validity of a prayer meeting depend on the *intentions* of the people who pray, even if the outcome is not as holy as the intention? We are told that where two or three are gathered together in His Name, then that is where God is to be found. However, we should examine that text again, for it does not refer to prayer meetings at all. Also, this promise is to those who gather 'in His Name'. It is not a promise divorced from intent.

I have attended prayer meetings where the pastor or some of the members were bitter, where human feelings were obviously to the fore. In no way can they offer true prayer at that time. Also, the promise (re two or three gathered) cannot apply if many of those present are unsaved or if Christians are cold toward Him or toward each other.

What happens in a meeting if only ONE person is in a right state to pray (or *is* there a 'fit state'?)? What if he alone is properly communing with God and all the others are cold or spiritually rebellious? Does this mean that God is NOT in their midst but only with that one man? In that case, such a meeting is invalid and should never have taken place. If such coldness continues, should that one man keep returning to such a barren place - or should he come out, like Lot?

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

On the other hand, is intent a side issue? Is the real value to be found in coming together - even if everyone is cold? That is, will God bless meetings simply because everybody is meeting together? Is mere duty blessed? After all, many prayer (and other) meetings are attended out of duty, not love. In what way is such a meeting different from, say, a union meeting, or the business meeting of a sports club?

PRAYER MENU

I am not the only one to be concerned. I know there are pastors and others who are just as concerned about the same thing. Why, then, is the situation carrying on? Could it be like the Annual Congress meetings in the time of Stalin? When he finished his speech everyone had to stand and clap, whether or not they wanted to. The clapping went on for many hours, because everybody was afraid to be the first to stop or to sit down! Those who stopped first were reported and were subsequently sent off to a labour camp. The same mentality occurs in our churches (but in 'love' of course): no-one wants to be the first to raise an issue, for fear of the consequences, of being branded an heretic or a backslider!

In many churches pastors, realising a need for change, issue what amounts to a 'prayer menu' of priorities, thinking it will help. Others say *"Don't pray-around-the-world tonight - we must pray for..."* and a list of items is issued. This, however, is wrong. The pastor is substituting one formula for another. It is mechanical and not Spirit-led. How can a pastor tell a group what to pray for, or how to pray? Maybe the Holy Spirit is telling the *pastor* what to privately pray for, but that does not mean everybody must pray for the same things.

A menu can be false; and it can be like the tired menus in restaurants, which attract fewer and fewer diners. A prayer menu removes individual discernment and prompting. At one meeting, we were told exactly what to pray for - a special meeting to be held the following year. Details were scarce: a team of 'evangelists' were to visit to help 'soften-up' the locality for our own 'big push'. Then members were asked to vote on what was already a decided issue... and afterward to 'pray about it'.

But pray about what? Some of us refused to do so, because we felt it was unbiblical. We were asking outsiders to do our own work, thinking that somehow everything would be wonderful after they had left. What would we then be left with? We would still have a churchful of cold and unresponsive Believers, who would then be expected to provide 'back-up' for the departing team.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

Thus the whole church 'prayed' for the event, except for four of us who dissented. If the issue being prayed for was invalid - then surely the whole prayer meeting itself was invalid? In this case the 'prayer menu' was just a tool of manipulation, to guide members along a predetermined human path of action, decided NOT by elders but by pastor and deacons. That is shoddy, political and underhanded, and not of God.

THE PRAYER MEETING

When a person prays in a prayer meeting, is his or her prayer *representative*? Is it said on behalf of all others present? We must remember that each person stands alone before God. Can, then, the prayers of a righteous man 'cover' all those others whose intentions are impure and unrighteous? Hardly.

If we say that the prayers of a righteous man *do* cover others of bad intent, then we fall into the Rome's Catholic trap, which uses priests as intercessors (or, rather, as stumbling blocks and interferers) and as absolvers of sin. This is very close to the setting up of hierarchies (which almost every church informally has anyway!), where one man is supposed to be 'holy' and whose 'faith' covers the failings of everyone else. 'Leaders' should not, therefore, try to force a congregation along a desired path - there are too many errors of presumption and pride to fall into. (This kind of behaviour is indicative of cult behaviour, not a true church).

If an individual prayer cannot thus 'cover' everyone else, then what is a prayer meeting (where prayers are said in public) actually for? Let us assume that everyone in a room prays. I have not personally attended a meeting where a single theme is adhered to, at least not to the same degree of earnestness or even with a show of real interest on the part of many. Rather, everyone 'prays' exactly as he or she wishes and much of what they say can be deemed 'private' to the person who prays.

Others DO 'pray around the world' without ever being specific. These 'universal' prayers say everything and yet nothing and, frankly, I see no justification in saying them: they are bland and impersonal, reflecting the fact that the person has nothing real to pray for! Instead, it is easier to 'pray' generally, using a format, than to pray from the heart as led by the Holy Spirit.

If each real prayer is personal, then what is the reason for coming together in the first place? If each of these prayers is supposed to be a personal encounter between an individual and God, then where do others fit into the picture? Where is the mandate? I strongly propose that 'corporate prayer' does not exist, but is just a play on words, a fumbling through traditional

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

activities, a pretence of corporateness stretched over a layer of individual agendas.

A dangerous concept now enters the scene. Frequently, I have heard the suggestion that gathering together 'concentrates' prayer and its 'power' (as though the act of prayer itself had power, rather than the power coming from God). Let us be rid of this superstition. At its extreme it is heresy. Exactly the same idea is found amongst witches in their covens, mediums in their trances, cult priests in their rites, Hindus in their group mantras, and so on.

When we say that prayer is more 'concentrated' or efficacious and made more powerful by geographic proximity, we are in immediate danger of making prayer occult, magical, mythical. We thus limit God's power and God Himself, to one spot on the globe and to one group of people who have the power to control Him. None of this is in the minds or hearts of those who thus pray - but it is definitely in their actions, intended or not.

God is omnipresent. It is absurd to imply that we can pin Him down to one place on earth. Or, that He cannot hear us too well unless we all pray together in the same room. Placing our bodies in close proximity does *not* make our prayers more potent! The prayers of one righteous man alone in his own home are worth more than the fervent pseudo-prayers of 100 men packed into a small church room. The power of prayer is vested in the Holy Spirit,

not

in physical proximity or in meeting once a week at a particular time to repeat oft-said mantras.

We must not be like occultists and cultists. We do not need physical concentration for prayer to 'work'. The only workable prayers are *true* prayers, where God first prompts us to pray, then we pray the prayer - God hears it because we 'pray aright' and because it was prompted by Him in the first place. Anything else is a delusion and is sin. It is only this

authoritative

prayer that works and has power.

The Lord does not just know what we are praying tonight, but He also knows what we will pray tomorrow. He knows our every thought, even before we start to think it. So, why do we try to limit Him to a single weeknight service and to meagre, dutiful, human words? The simple, individual prayers of righteous men all over the world *are* a 'prayer meeting'!

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

There is no guarantee that God will prompt people to pray simply because they have gathered together for what they call a 'prayer meeting' (scheduled by pastors and not by God Himself). If God does not prompt people to pray, does this mean the meeting is a failure? Any 'failure' is on the part of men, not God. So, how can we honestly meet together for the express purpose of 'praying', when there is no prompting of God to *meet*, let alone to *pray*? Should not prayer be a *part* of meetings - and only if those who pray are genuinely called to do so?

Meanings of 'Prayer' in the Bible

Emphasis and actual meaning of each word depends on context - the texts and the situations they are used in. However, in most cases there is a general unity in their meanings. As an example, some of the possible meanings of the word 'pray' are cited below:

OLD TESTAMENT

Incitement and entreaty, e.g. "I beseech you", "oh".

(Note: The word most used for 'pray' is *nâ*. It is usually used as a request between two persons, in the same way as we might say "Would you please do me a favour?" Therefore, it has nothing to do with prayer meetings or with prayer as we know it today)

To judge; intercede; make supplication.

Used as a wish, e.g. "I would that", "I pray thee", "would God that", etc.

To stoop to kindness to an inferior; to favour, or to bestow; to implore; grant graciously; be merciful

To be weak/sick/afflicted, or to grieve or to make sick. Make prayer or be sorry; woman in travail; be wounded, etc.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

To impinge by accident/violence, or by importunity; to come between; cause to entreat; make intercession; intercessor; meet together; come upon; reach/run, etc.

(Note: The word used for 'meet together' above is p̄aga'. It occurs only once, in Job 21:15, when the question is asked "What profit should we have, if we pray unto him?" Thus, this term cannot be used as a proof-text for corporate prayer meetings).

NEW TESTAMENT

To supplicate (pray to God); worship; to pray earnestly.

To beg/petition/beseech; pray to; make request to, etc.

To call near; invite; invoke; call for; exhort, etc.

To interrogate/request; ask.

To wish/pray to God.

It can be seen that New Testament meanings are close to Old Testament meanings.

The various derivatives of 'pray' (prayer, etc.) have virtually the same meanings. Note, also, that certain words are used interchangeably. An example is p̄alal, which is used for 'pray', 'prayer', 'prayeth', 'praying' and 'prayed'.

Usage

Interesting as such facts may be, meanings cannot be separated from their usage. That is, how words are used in their contexts. Thus, after examining each of the 510 texts that contained the

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

seven words shown above, I then examined *how* they were used. The following headings or categories were used.

P+P

Between human person and human person, e.g. two people talking to each other, or similar.

P+A

Between an human person and an angel.

P+G

Between an human person and God the Father.

P+J

Between an human person and Jesus.

P+P(J)

Reported speech of Jesus, e.g. as He prayed to God the Father.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

J+G

Between Jesus and God the Father.

(Note that **none** of these refer to **groups** of people)

Perhaps the reader thinks I am merely playing with words. Let me explain: I am looking for support for prayer meetings, or evidence against them. To this juncture, the actual meanings of the words 'pray', etc., do not provide conclusive proof either way. So now I am looking at these same words in their contexts; the situations in which they were used. If they are used in situations we can call 'corporate' then we can deduce there may be a place for modern prayer meetings. The following, then, is a brief analysis of the various usages. Not all usages are shown, but I can assure readers that nothing important has been missed out. (To avoid duplication some usages have been grouped together):

CLASSIFICATION

NUMBER TIMES USED (APPROX.)

Old Testament

P+P

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

188

P+A

6

P+G

25

New Testament

P+P

100

P+A

1

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

P+P(J)

42

J+G

3

From this analysis we can see that when 'pray' is used, it mostly refers to two human individuals (P+P). In the Old Testament, the main usage is in the term "*I pray thee*", which has nothing to do with corporate or any other kind of prayer. In the New Testament, this same terminology is used 100 times.

The other usages follow a similar pattern. Most of them (nearly all) refer to just two people talking to each other and include Jesus talking with an individual and Jesus talking with God the Father.

Where speech from Jesus' lips is reported it usually refers to Him speaking to God... ALONE. Throughout, then, we are reading of *personal encounters* and not of corporate situations. This means we cannot appeal to any of these words to support corporateness in prayer. It would appear, then, that support comes from tradition only – or personal desires of dictatorial leaders.

POSSIBLE EXCEPTIONS

There *appear* to be exceptions to all this, that *might* refer to corporate prayer. These are shown below. Not all the cases are given - just sufficient to prove the point. Remember that these

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

usages are the

exception in scripture.

Look at Numbers 21:7. Here people are gathered in large groups, but only one man prays - Moses prays **on behalf of** the people. The closest parallel today is when a preacher prays a benediction or mid-service prayer. Thus, they are NOT 'corporate' prayers.

The form of 'pray' used in the Moses example is *pâlal*, meaning a one-to-one prayer. The same kind of thing is seen in many other situations, such as in 1 Samuel 7:5, where Samuel prays **on behalf of** the people. Later, in verse eight, Israel begs him to pray **for** them (it means exactly the same thing).

This is NOT corporate prayer as we perceive it today. Indeed, I believe the word '*corporate*' is a stumbling-block. It is misleading - it is *impossible* to pray corporately, unless **every** person uses **exactly the same** words and the **same concepts** and has the **same frame of mind and heart** at **exactly the same time!** Even if this happened, if it was executed regularly it would be '*vain repetition*' and would not be true prayer.

We find that Jesus took Himself *away from people* to pray. Even when the disciples accompanied Him, He took Himself a little farther away from them so that He could pray alone. The only time He appears to have prayed publicly was when He performed a specific task, such as a public miracle. Even then His words were VERY brief, not flowery or lengthy.

When we come to the prayers of the publican and the Pharisee, although they are both

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

engaged in prayer, they are not praying corporately. Even in 1 Corinthians 14, it is not clear if corporate prayer is alluded to, although the text does speak of 'meeting together'. We certainly are commanded to meet together, but we should not thereby assume that this means we must pray together regularly. To do so would be to make the classic mistake of projecting a specific instance into a general concept. What happened in one instance does not necessarily apply to all instances. An extreme example would be to say that we can all raise the dead because Jesus raised Lazarus.

If we followed Jesus' example, then we would never hold corporate prayer meetings. Remember the Christian who read the original draft of this article some years ago and said "*I agree with what you say... but what do you put in the place of prayer meetings?*".

The answer is simple, but it eluded him - we put NOTHING in its place! We have no command or justification to fill a space in the local church's social week, just for the sake of it. Nor are we to install *another* 'meeting' to take the place of a meeting that was invalid to begin with! A Bible study would be far more appropriate!

Another vital clue is found in Matthew, where we are told not to use vain repetitions (Greek: 'empty words!'). James 5:14 speaks of elders (pastors) praying together AS ELDERS, ON BEHALF OF OTHERS (in this case, sick persons). Again, this is a public prayer but for a SPECIFIC PURPOSE. On the other hand, it does not say whether or not other Believers were present. In this passage, the elders (not deacons) were called together just as the old leaders called together the tribes of Israel, for particular purposes and not just out of habit!

We must be careful how we *read* texts, too. In Acts 20:36, for example, we are told that Paul "*prayed with them all*"

. At first sight, it seems that he prayed in a prayer meeting. But, the Greek text puts it this way: "*Kneeling down with all (of them) he prayed.*"

Now, this could mean either that they all prayed together, or that Paul prayed on their behalf. (The latter appears to be the most appropriate). Therefore, this text cannot be used in support of regular, corporate prayer meetings.

Matthew 6:1-8 provides the most striking picture of prayer. In verses five and six we are told to pray where **others cannot see or hear us!** How do we reconcile this with prayer meetings? The passage begins with a warning about giving and continues with the same warning when

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

discussing the matter of prayer. In both cases a public show is deplored and rejected by Christ.

The word used for prayer here is *proseuchomai*, meaning to make supplication to God and to worship Him. The word comes from *pros*, which effectively means to

'draw near to'

. It is also linked with the word

euchoimai

, which speaks of the wish to pray to God. All of this is highly private. The word

proseuchomai

occurs only in this passage. The word 'secret' (

kruptos

) used in this text entirely supports the idea of personal, private prayer.

Kruptos

means

'concealed'

or

'private and hidden'

or

'inward'

(probably referring to silent prayer). This word comes from the root verb

'krupto'

, meaning

'to conceal oneself; to cover; to hide oneself and to keep secret'

. These words are strongly distinct and cannot be interpreted in any other way.

It must be remembered that Jesus Christ said these things. How are we to take it all? Obviously, Jesus meant His words to be taken exactly as they were spoken, as law or command. Our task, then, is to see if the concept of corporate prayer can reconcile itself to this unique command of Jesus Christ. Again, I must repeat, the words for 'prayest' and 'secret' cannot possibly be interpreted in various alternative ways, because they have pre-defined, specific meanings.

So, we are commanded to pray in private, in our own closet or room. The reason for this has already been touched upon - God does not like hypocrisy. Hypocrisy includes praying out of mere duty and praying so that others can hear us being (outwardly) pious. Thus, whoever deals with this matter of prayer meetings must first deal carefully with this direct, unambiguous command of Jesus Christ. It cannot be ignored. I have received approval from various theological quarters for the general tone and content of this article, but the same readers add "*I do not necessarily agree with all its conclusions*"

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

. Interestingly, they do not tell me what parts they do not agree with! Is this because of a regard for tradition or because of sound theological reasoning? I don't think it is the latter.

In some of the instances above and in other cases not mentioned here, the words '*we*' and '*bret hren*'

are used. But, this is not an indication that people must gather together to pray as a regular matter of course. In Acts 1:14 for example, we see that disciples met and prayed together "*with one accord*"

(
homothumodon

). This does not necessarily mean that they all prayed together in the same room, though it is possible (I point it out as a matter of logic).

Homothumodon means '*unanimously*' or '*with one mind*'. That is, they were all in agreement! Yet, there is far more to it than that - it means the Holy Spirit had filled their hearts with *exactly the same*

message and prompting. Thus they all prayed about exactly the same thing, at the same time. It was as though the whole group had the 'same mind' but different bodies. There is no way we can honestly claim this has happened in any prayer meeting we have ever attended, except on very rare and honest occasions, prompted by the Holy Spirit alone at an unscheduled time!

Homothumodon comes from the word *homou*, meaning '*same*'. It is similar to the word *hama*, meaning to be '*close to*'

. In these several meanings there is also the element of physical proximity. Taken as a whole, they refer to the gathering together of Believers for

one specific purpose

and with

one spiritual mind

. This is further supported by another root of *homothumodon*

-
thumos

- meaning '*passion*'

. The depth and reality of this passion is seen in the root of *thumos*

itself, which is *thuo*

. It refers to killing, or sacrifice, or breathing hard! Do we see this kind of intensity and passion in

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

modern prayer meetings? (In some there is plenty of passion - but of a human kind, generated by emotions). No, we do not.

Finally, the words discussed above are all linked with the word '*spirit*' (*psuche*), which takes us right back to Matthew, where Jesus says we must pray in the spirit (privately). Taken as a whole, then, praying is an intense, *private* activity, between one person and God.

Even if, after the evidence shown, we are still keen to maintain prayer meetings, we should note that everywhere (to my knowledge) that praying-together is mentioned in the Bible, the above facts hold true - that people prayed together for specific purposes and in the deepest and most profound of spiritual senses (i.e. they were of 'one mind'). Note that "*with one accord*" can include the concept of praying with the heart, i.e. silently or inwardly.

From all this, readers can see why I question the whole idea of corporate prayer as we now know it. There are only one or two texts that *might* refer to corporate prayer, but they are open to other interpretations. These exceptions are unlikely to refer to open, public, audible prayers made by everyone in a meeting. They certainly DO NOT refer to regularly-held 'prayer meetings' (that deal with almost every topic under the sun). Nor do prayer meetings rest easily alongside the command of Jesus Christ in Matthew. There is absolutely no link between the two.

CONCLUSIONS

I have seen (and felt) the coldness of prayer meetings. My questions arise out of concern. If prayer meetings exist according to scriptural definition - THEN WHERE ARE THEY? *Everyone* claims to attend or to hold the best prayer meetings!

Everyone

claims to hold prayer meetings of the kind I never see (I don't intend attending them to find out - I've already done that, too many times!).

Everyone

claims that their prayer meetings are truly of God and are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit; they have even claimed this in meetings I have attended! In many cases such claims have been the result of personal opinion and emotional ecstasy. Claims made with glazed eyes. Take away the emotion and there is nothing left. Such bias can grow out of loyalty to the local fellowship, or from a prejudiced view of what spirituality is: it is all personal opinion, not scriptural fact or true evidence.

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

What we *feel* in a prayer meeting is not necessarily proof of Holy Spirit involvement or of Biblical Truth. Ultimately, ***it is irrelevant*** how 'wonderful' our prayer meetings are, or how 'blessed' we think we are by them - if prayer meetings as we now know them *should not exist*, then that is the end of the story; how we *feel* about it is beside the point and superfluous! It is all personal opinion and no more. Readers are reminded that Satan can manufacture or counterfeit 'spiritual' atmospheres and that many cults claim marvellous things for *their* prayer meetings.

To this point in time, then, I cannot find proof in support of prayer meetings as we now know them. But, I would add the following:

1.

*There is no evidence in support of **regularly-held** meetings that are convened especially for prayer, or for prayer-sessions within any other kind of meeting (e.g. Bible studies) that are held on a regular basis and scheduled well in advance.*

2.

*Of all the references I have studied concerning prayer in the Bible, there are no evidences to suggest that prayer meetings were ever held **except** for specific purposes and "with one mind", and for urgent reasons.*

3.

Jesus Himself tells us to pray in private.

I do not presume to have all the answers, because I *know* I do not have them. It is now up to the reader to check what has been said and to come to an honest conclusion. We cannot rely on our feelings, or (especially) our traditions. The Bible is our only and ultimate source of authority. Even if prayer meetings are a product of tradition, so long as that tradition is solidly

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

based in scripture, then it is valid.

Our traditions, then, must be in concert with the whole of scripture. We must not use isolated texts, or favoured interpretations that contradict original meanings, just to support our own ideas. That is what cults do! With prayer, we must face the fact found in Matthew - that Jesus tells us to pray in private.

We must examine what we mean by 'corporate'. If it simply means that people gather together because they are expected to and they all pray about different things (with varying degrees of sincerity) then I am firmly against that. It is a pointless exercise - we can do that in our own closets.

So, does 'corporate' mean something else? Does it mean to pray as Samuel did, on behalf of others? In that case, everyone listens and assents with 'Amen'. But, that is not 'corporate' prayer - it is *representative* prayer. (Note: the term '*corporate*' prayer is not found in scripture).

Even if this is what 'corporate' prayer is, it must not degenerate into a weekly event, because that would not fit the Biblical pattern. It does not fit the Biblical pattern because there *is* no pattern! Rather, prayers were

ad hoc

when done publicly. They were never unclear or ambiguous and always had a single, specific purpose, unlike our rambling and erroneous prayer meetings today.

By implication we should ask similar questions about all our other meetings. We are commanded to meet together, although we are not told exactly what to do when we meet. But, all these questions get us nowhere. We need action on this issue. I am sure that God prefers to see sincere, flawed action to perfect inactivity! If we suspect or know that something is wrong and we do nothing about it, then we are guilty of sin. Possibly drastic changes are necessary within our churches. Can we face up to them? Surely God is praised and glorified by such discernment? Surely, it is a sign of vital, committed Christianity?

We must not change things for the sake of it, nor must we make changes to be 'modern'. We must change to be closer to what God wants us to be. I do not wish to 'go back to Apostolic days' (as some groups wish to do), because those days are past. But, what we have today is

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

dead, or almost dead. We carry a dead body called 'prayer meeting' and we need to bury it. When will we come out of our stupor? Spiritual lives are groaning under the weight of a false church life. What are YOU going to do about it?

Knowledge brings responsibility. Now that you know the argument made in this paper, you must face the consequences. This is a deliberate operation of the Holy Spirit - we cannot be told of something and then ignore it or 'forget' about it because it raises difficult issues. Talk deeply about this topic. Look for the Biblical. Forget your traditions or your emotional ties to the prayer meeting. God says that He honours those who honour Him. Do we honour Him in our prayer meetings? I do not think so. If, after you have checked my argument, you come to the same conclusions, then you have only one course of action open to you - **change!** It is change for the good and to the Glory of God.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, readers must understand what 'criticism' is. Criticism is often regarded as being destructive. So, critics are thought to be bad people, only out to destroy. This is a misinterpretation of the facts. Criticism is always constructive, even if it comes to conclusions we do not like.

Destructive criticism is really a contradiction in terms. *True* criticism examines, observes the facts, and arrives at reasonable conclusions based on those facts: so, another word for it is 'judgment'. In itself this is not destructive, even if some of the conclusions are 'negative'. 'Destructive

criticism' is really another term for 'prejudiced reasoning', whereby a person ignores the facts and only looks at the matter with an opinionated adverse view!

Churches and individual Christians must never be afraid of true criticism. Christian criticism is an evaluation of spiritual facts. This is a legitimate role of theology and it is constructive. It is a function of discernment and is given to us by authority of the command to 'test the spirits'.

Well, I have critically examined prayer meetings. The reader must now respond by asking a number of questions:

(a) Is the prayer meeting valid?

Are Prayer Meetings Valid?

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 30 August 2016 11:55

(b) If it is, then what form should it take?

(c) If it is *invalid*, then is attendance also invalid?

(d) If attendance is invalid, is it also *sinful*?

Pastors, too, must honestly face these questions, just as his (God's) flock must support him as he attempts to grapple with these and other weighty issues. We must *all* examine the content and 'style' of our meetings, and must ask the same question as before - are they valid?

These questions are not the sole property of theologians, or of pastors and deacons. Every Believer has the right and the need to ask questions, and to want answers. The sheer formality and structure of many meetings dampens vigour and probably frightens off newcomers to the faith. Even those churches that claim to be 'free' or 'spirit led' and informal tend toward a rigid structure after a short while. Thus the need to question is always present. Where is spiritual life? Where is the attractive magnetism of open, overflowing power and love? No, I am not talking about the glazed-eyed romanticism found amongst certain brethren who claim certain gifts, where frenetic activities take the place of true spiritual growth!

There should be more spiritual informality (not chaos or anarchy, where everybody leads: there can be no such thing as democracy in churches), but the kind that comes from allowing the Holy Spirit to do as He wishes. After all, the local church is not a business with bosses and workers, even if that is what it usually looks like! It is a congregation of equals, pastor included.

The pastor need not always lead, because that is not his function. He may, along with others called to do so, oversee proceedings to ensure that the flock do not harm themselves or are harmed by others. There will be many occasions when his leading is not required or necessary. Most pastors assume a breadth of role not apportioned to them by God. How often pastors say that others do not recognise their authority - but they are not in a position of absolute power, nor are they bosses, though this is how many see themselves and how many Christians treat them.

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This writer believes prayer should be a part of life in a general sense. That is, prayer should be made as and when needed, not according to a fixed calendar of meetings. Prayer should be specific and only made by those called to pray (We must pray always – when God calls us to pray).

When public, prayers should be representative, but a 'round' of prayers should not be sought, for this brings the danger of unsolicited, improper prayer, which is not prompted or wanted by God and is not desired by the one praying. Public prayer must be clearly prompted by the Holy Spirit. How do we know the difference between prompted prayer and human prayer? The difference is overwhelming and unmistakable! Indeed, if you have to ask the question, then you have *never known* true public prayer. The pastor or other person who offers representative prayer should only do so if prompted. If not prompted, then do not pray. It is as simple and as potent as that.

There must be more, real, inter-relating; fellow Believers must get to know each other properly (Believers should have no continuing social contact with unbelievers - we should find our friends amongst other Believers). God's rule must flow into every sphere of our lives, including church, work, play, politics, social activities, and so on.

People must be encouraged to voice their legitimate doubts and fears; we must all examine Truth together. Pastors and teachers must not expect or seek blind obedience, nor should they expect to talk and then sit down. The congregation have the right to ask questions and to make comments, whether it is a Sunday sermon or a mid-week Bible study. Pastors should not think of sermons as one-way, one-man performances without comebacks! There is insufficient communication between pastor/s and others. Any psycho-social study would reveal a definite hierarchy of so-called authority in almost any church; pastoral aloofness is just one sign of it. Do not expect fellow Believers to simply sit and listen.

The Christian life is dynamic and full of power. When it is lived according to scripture (God's word) it is also full of authority. We see so little of these factors because we do not allow the Holy Spirit to live through us and we do not follow full scriptural teaching. Dynamism, power and authority can all be ours because it ALREADY IS OURS! If prayer meetings must be changed or cast aside, then let it be done, NOW. Do it and follow

God

, not self or tradition. If prayer meetings should

not

exist, then

do not

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attend them, for to do so would be sin. Do not attempt to put something else in their place, for then you are being false.

Live your Christian life as it *ought* to be lived, in the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. It should not be a continuous round of engagements and meetings, all with different names and days on which to attend them. We are not called to develop a full programme of events, or to cleverly devise special meetings that will 'appeal' to youngsters, or to carefully 'balance' meetings, etc.

Let God do it all.

If He wishes you to hold this or that meeting, then let it be so. By devising all sorts of meetings to cover every day of the week, you actually exclude God and His power, no matter how much you think the Holy Spirit is with you. It is our Christian responsibility to praise God first. Everything else, including meetings, must come second. Even witnessing comes second to praising and obeying God. He will develop any meetings He wants you to have, usually without you knowing it! To fill-out the week for the sake of it is to invite spiritual disaster.

The glory of God is of greater significance than a gap in our local church calendar of weekly events! Why not have short Bible studies instead? They would do far more good than the weekly, sterile prayer meeting.

For a more comprehensive treatment of the subject, see course Ref. No. SBT/3: Prayer Meetings (which includes the text of this Article, plus discussion points, comments and test papers). Also see the Response, A-130, containing comments about criticisms of the Article.

The course is offered by the School of Bible Theology, a ministry of Bible Theology Ministries (BTM). For details please send to BTM at the usual address.

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