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ABSTRACT
Corporate Prayer in the Book of Acts:
Lessons for the American Church
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The American Church today is in a poor state as it relates to the practice of corporate prayer. As I have had the opportunity to spend time in churches in several Asian countries, I have observed that our brothers and sisters in these other lands take corporate prayer much more seriously than do we in the United States. My own local church is no exception. In dealing with this issue, I studied corporate prayer in the Book of Acts to see what could be learned from the early church on this subject. I looked at every reference to people in the church praying together in Acts, and then asked the questions: “What does this teach about God?”; “What does this teach about us?”; “What does this teach about corporate prayer?”

I was expecting to come away with a “methodology” for corporate prayer which could be adopted by churches in America. Instead, what I found was that in writing Acts, Luke was far more interested in showing the attitudes and characteristics of the people in the early church, and that these were reflected in the practice and discipline of corporate prayer. Hence, my conclusion on what the American Church needs to better the practice of corporate prayer is to have a better view of God Himself, and to be driven to prayer from that view.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

For the most part, churches in America today don’t practice the discipline of corporate prayer effectively. While American churches do seem to encourage prayer to the people in their congregations, the encouragement is usually geared toward an individual’s personal prayer time. Corporate prayer in the American church worship service is normally limited at best, and often opportunities for the church to gather for corporate prayer at other times during the week (if there are opportunities at all) have poor turnout. After having spent time in churches in Asia (Japan, Philippines, South Korea), it has become apparent to me that our fellow believers in Asia (or at least in the Asian churches I have visited) understand and practice corporate prayer in a more biblical way than the typical church in America. Therefore, in this paper I will research and discuss the practices of corporate prayer in the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts (when the Christian Church was in its infancy) in order to discern and promote solid biblical models for corporate prayer in the American Church. U.S. News and Beliefnet teamed up to do a survey on the practice of prayer among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. While they surveyed a number of aspects of prayer, the most telling for this paper was the question “Where do you pray most often?” For Christians, only 4.4% answered that they pray most often at a house of worship. 79.5% of Christians say they pray most often at home.\(^1\) While this alone may not necessarily indicate that churches are not

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meeting together regularly for corporate prayer, it certainly helps to raise that question. Though statistics are difficult to find on how often the average church in America meets for times of corporate prayer, it is observed that in general most American churches do not practice this discipline widely. In his book *The Lost Art of Praying Together*, James Banks wrote:

> George Barna surveyed several hundred senior pastors to determine their top three ministry priorities. Discipleship and spiritual development ranked highest (47 percent listed it as a priority). Evangelism and outreach were also right up there (46 percent). Preaching rounded out third place (35 percent). Prayer wasn’t even in the running. Only 3 percent of pastors listed it among their primary priorities for ministry.¹

It may be that most of the pastors surveyed were not looking at “prayer” as a ministry, but rather something that undergirds the ministries in which they are involved. However, it is an interesting statistic which may indicate something important. In speaking to his congregation in Minnesota, well known author and speaker John Piper said this:

> But I think that praying in the assembly of other believers is more neglected than praying alone. Alone and assembled. The New Testament is full of corporate prayer gatherings. In fact most prayer in the New Testament is probably thought of in terms of gatherings for prayer.²

If in fact Piper is correct, and most prayer in the New Testament is thought of in terms of gathering for prayer, a large portion of American churches are not praying according to the example we have of the early Church. E.M. Bounds spoke to this lack of prayer in churches when he wrote:

> As God’s house is, preeminently, a house of prayer, prayer should enter into and underlie everything that is undertaken there. Prayer belongs to every sort of work appertaining to the Church of God. As God’s house is a house where the business of

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¹ James Banks, *The Lost Art of Praying Together* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Discovery House Publishers, 2009).

praying is carried on, so is it a place where the business of making praying people out of prayerless people is done. The house of God is a Divine workshop, and there the work of prayer goes on. Or the house of God is a Divine schoolhouse, in which the lesson of prayer is taught; where men and women learn to pray, and where they are graduated, in the school of prayer. Any church calling itself the house of God, and failing to magnify prayer; which does not put prayer in the forefront of its activities; which does not teach the great lesson of prayer, should change its teaching to conform to the Divine pattern or change the name of its building to something other than a house of prayer.  

As the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recorded, Jesus Himself exclaimed “My house shall be called a house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13; ESV). It is apparent that the Temple, the “house of God”, was to be known as a house of prayer. Yet it seems that the Temple had not been acting as a “house of prayer” at this time in history, and Jesus reacted passionately to the fact that the Temple was being used for things which were nothonoring to God. The idea of the Temple being known as a “house of prayer” has several implications. Among those implications are that the Temple is to be a place where the people of God pray, and that when one thinks or speaks of the Temple it is to be thought of as a place where the people of God gather to pray. In other words, not only should the Temple be a place of prayer, but it should be to such an extent that the very mention of the word “Temple” should bring “prayer” to mind. Since in the New Covenant the people of God themselves are God’s temple, should it not be that the people of God (the Church) are to be a house of prayer? I believe so! When the Church meets, it should pray. As with the Old Testament temple, God’s house should be known as a house of prayer. And such should be the local congregations of God’s people. But does this describe the contemporary American church? Is prayer one of the primary characteristics and distinctions of the modern church in America? John Franklin, in his book And the Place was Shaken, writes “By and large

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American Christians have abandoned fervent, united, corporate prayer.4 The current American church may be known for many good things, but being as “house of prayer” is likely not high on the list (if it appears at all!). When writing about the modern American Church, Pastor James Banks put it this way: “There is no greater need in the church today than for Christians to recapture the lost art of praying together.”5

When considering the need for corporate prayer, there are two basic options for this to take place in the local church: during the weekly worship service; and other times during the week. Both are important, and both have their place in the local church. Many American churches have some sort of prayer time built into their worship services, but they are rarely more than a pastor or person from the congregation saying a short public prayer with the congregation announcing “amen” at the end of the prayer. In stark contrast to this practice, James Banks shares a personal story of visiting the church of a well-known pastor:

Toward the beginning of the worship service, Pastor Jack Hayford turned to the congregation and said, “This is the time where we pray for each other. I’d like to ask you to turn to a couple of people beside you and bring any concerns you may personally have before God together”... I can’t tell you anything else that happened that morning. I don’t remember the sermon or a single song. But that quiet moment in prayer stays with me.6

In my experience, this type of praying together in a Sunday morning worship service is rare in modern American churches. There are certainly different ways in which to incorporate prayer into worship services, and that will be dealt with later in this paper. But the point which is being made here is that there seems to be little corporate prayer done in Sunday worship services in American churches today.

4 John Franklin, And the Place Was Shaken (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman & Holman, 2005).
5Banks.
6Ibid.
The other main way of corporate prayer is for the church to meet together for prayer at times other than the weekly worship service. In earlier generations in America, Wednesday (or mid-week) night prayer services were commonplace. In early American history, the people of God seemed to pray together often. John Owen was a well-known Puritan pastor and author who lived in 17th century England. In writing about prayer, Owen said:

This is the will of God, that in assemblies of his appointment, as churches and families, and occasional meetings of two or three or more in the name of Christ, one should pray in the name of himself and the rest that join with him. Thus are ministers enabled to pray in church-assemblies, as other Christians in occasional meetings of the disciples of Christ in his name; parents in their families; and in secret, every believer for himself.7

In this passage, Owen was explaining how the people were to pray. In doing so, he stressed the importance of prayer in corporate settings as well as in personal or individual settings. In reading this, one can clearly see the implication that the Puritans likely understood the need for the church to be praying together. But unfortunately, these times of corporate prayer seem to have fallen out of favor in modern American churches. John Franklin states of the Church in America:

However, by and large we have abandoned meaningful prayer meetings. Most that remain are anemic and weak. This begs the question: might there be a connection, especially in light of God’s activity worldwide? Could we be spiritually imploding because we have forsaken what the apostles guarded as one of their two top priorities?8

Many evangelical churches today promote “small groups” for the people of their congregations to meet together apart from Sunday worship to study the Bible and to pray together. This has the potential of being effective in church-wide prayer, but in experience most of these small group prayer times tend to be focused in the needs of the individuals in

8 Franklin.
the group and not necessarily focused on either the vision or direction of the local church or of the Church at large.

To say that the typical American church does not pray together effectively and regularly does not seem to be an understatement. I have been made acutely aware of this fact as I have had the privilege to travel to several parts of Asia to visit with and serve churches with which my local church has an ongoing partnership. I have traveled to the Philippines three times, Japan three times, and South Korea once. In each of those trips, and in my ongoing communication with these churches, it has been both encouraging and humbling to see how much corporate prayer is practiced by these particular churches. Before my trip to South Korea, I had heard about their “dawn prayer meetings”. Dawn prayer meetings have become the norm for many of the Christian churches in South Korea, and I looked forward to learning more about it. In an article entitled What We can Learn from the Korean Church, the author wrote “Perhaps the most conspicuous element of the Korean church is prayer. Almost all Korean churches have a very strong emphasis on the importance of prayer. For example, many Korean churches, if not all, host morning prayer meetings on a daily basis.”9 While writing an article for Baptist Press, Suzanne Davis quotes Shin Deok Ra, a Korean seminary student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. She writes:

Ra describes early morning prayer as a spiritual discipline rooted in South Korea's history and culture. “Fifty years ago, one of the major industries was agriculture,” he said. “Everyone had to wake up before sunrise. But the church emphasized prayer, so the people would come to the church before work. They opened the day with prayer”.10

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9What We Can Learn from the Korean Church, available from http://www.historyandtheology.com/?p=2343; Internet; accessed 16 April 2013. (Author not identified)

Since then, the practice of “early morning prayer” had become normal in the South Korean churches. In preparation for my trip there, I was both excited and apprehensive about experiencing this daily habit of dawn prayer. In the particular church where I visited, dawn prayer began at 5:30 AM. I was impressed to see the number of people who actually showed up to the early prayer meetings, and it was immediately apparent how important these times of prayer were to this church. I couldn’t help but think about how few (if any) people would regularly come to a 5:30 AM prayer time at the church where I serve. But yet here was a large group of believers who deemed it important to pray together daily, and were willing to sacrifice some sleep in order to make it happen. It was an extremely humbling and meaningful time for me and for the team which accompanied me.

My times in the Philippines were equally as humbling as I met with believers in a few churches there. The main church where I have spent time is located in Los Banos, about two hours south of Manila. The church is located in a suburban setting, away from the large city of Manila. It is in an area where there is a mixture of middle and low income levels. The church has planted several other churches in the time that I have known them, with plans to start several more in the next few years. One of the most important aspects of their ministry is daily corporate prayer. In this particular Philippine church, their habit is to meet daily at 6:00 PM for prayer. On my first trip there, we would meet out in back of the church in an open “prayer hut” made out of bamboo with a thatched roof. It was raised up off the ground on stilts, and had walls which came up only about three feet from the floor. The rest of the sides were open to the elements up to the roof. It was a beautiful place to pray, but one was easy prey for mosquitos and other sorts of insects while out there! They have since moved into the church building for prayer time because the prayer hut was not big enough when more people came to pray. But my brothers and sisters in the Philippines are committed to
praying together, and do so on a daily basis. To give you a sense of the commitment to prayer at this church, I saw a young leader of the church one morning who looked a bit tired. When I asked him about it, he related to me that he hadn’t slept well the night before. As I probed to find out why, he finally revealed to me that he had spent the entire night in prayer for me and my team out in the prayer hut, and the mosquitoes were biting so much that he wasn’t able to sleep. I realized that this was a group of people who take prayer seriously! In both South Korea and the Philippines, the Church seems to be growing well, and I can’t help but think the commitment to corporate prayer plays a large part in their growth.

I have also spent time in Japan, where Christians make up less than 1% of the population. The church with which we are in partnership has their main church in Osaka, and also has about 18 chapels spread throughout the Osaka area (as well as some other parts of Japan). One of the most important things the people in these Japanese chapels do is pray. They not only hold midweek prayer services for their people, but they meet every morning at 6:00 AM for corporate prayer as well. Because they are in an environment which is overwhelmingly non-Christian, these churches in Japan have committed to regular times of prayer together in order to advance the gospel. Their dedication and commitment is a constant encouragement to me personally, and a great example of the priority of prayer in the local church. My team was often tired by the end of the day while in Japan, but all agreed that the experience of meeting together first thing in the morning to pray was well worth being a little tired. These particular churches in South Korea, Philippines, and Japan have all been a great example of the commitment to corporate prayer. While I am aware that “early morning prayer” is typical in the churches of South Korea, I have not been able to determine if daily corporate prayer is typical among most Evangelical churches in the Philippines or Japan. It may be that it is typical only of the churches with which I have had experience. Yet
even if that is the case, these churches present both a great example and a great challenge to 
the churches in the United States.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

I will be using several primary and secondary sources in writing this thesis. My primary sources are those which have dealt directly with the topic of corporate prayer in the Church. Dr. Grant Osborne is a professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has written an article published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* entitled “Moving Forward on Our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament.” I discovered his article as I was researching sources for this topic, and it has become a wealth of information for me. This article has been helpful not only in looking at corporate prayer in the New Testament, but also in looking at the history of corporate prayer in the Temple and synagogues in the 1st century.

Another primary source is the book *And the Place Was Shaken* by John Franklin. Dr. Franklin is a pastor, and also is the founder of “John Franklin Ministries.” In this book, Franklin talks of the need for more and effective corporate prayer in modern evangelical American churches, and gives instruction on how churches can pray together. He writes with great conviction about the need for churches to be praying corporately, and gives good practical advice on how they can do so.

The book *The Lost Art of Praying Together* is also a primary source I am using for this paper. Dr. James Banks is a pastor and church planter, and writes and speaks to encourage Christians to engage in united prayer. This book is an encouragement to make united prayer a priority in churches, families, and other Christian gatherings.
D.A Carson is a well-known Christian author and speaker. He is a research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and is a resource I often turn to for insight on various biblical topics. In his book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, he looks at the prayers of the apostle Paul in his letters to the churches. There is much helpful information in this book relating to prayer, and is applicable to both private and corporate prayer.

There are many secondary sources I will be using, although some of them could be regarded as primary sources as well. John McRay is a retired professor of New Testament and Archeology from Wheaton College. He has written an article in *Christian History* entitled “The Place of Prayer: What Exactly Took Place in a Synagogue Service?” which has proven to be very helpful in understanding the influence of synagogues on the early church in regard to corporate prayer.

I am also using several books by the renowned E.M. Bounds. He has written much about prayer, and I have turned to his writings for insight into prayer in general. Though his books are not specific to corporate prayer, there is still much which can be learned from his writings. The books I will reference are *The Possibilities of Prayer, The Necessity of Prayer*, and *Power Through Prayer*.

There are also several commentaries which I will reference in interpreting the passages specifically in the book of Acts. Though I will utilize many commentaries, the main one will be: *Calvin's Commentaries* by John Calvin; *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, with the commentary on Acts written by Richard N. Longenecker; *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, with the commentary on Acts written by I. Howard Marshall. Additionally, I will use several sermons by pastor and author John Piper as references pertaining to corporate prayer.
CHAPTER 3
CORPORATE PRAYER IN FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM

As the early Christian Church was birthed and began to develop, it was influenced in many ways from the spiritual practices of the Hebrews. Since all of the apostles and a majority of the earliest Christians were Jewish, it would be natural for them to continue many of the spiritual disciplines of the Jews. Such disciplines include things like corporate worship, the reading of the Word of God, fasting, and prayer. We see in the New Testament indications that many of the early Christians may have continued to worship (or at least pray) in the Temple for some period of time. As Luke writes in the book of Acts, “Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (Acts 3:1 [ESV]). This is likely an example of the early disciples continuing in the spiritual traditions with which they were familiar. According to Dr. Grant Osborne:

It is clear the early church revered the Temple as a ‘house of prayer’ (Mark 11:17 par), and the condemnation was directed against the ‘false shepherds of Israel’ (Ezek 34:1-10) who had desecrated God’s house.¹

The early church had great reverence for the Temple, as seen in their continuing practice of worshipping and prayer there. In order to get a good understanding of the practice of corporate prayer in the early Church, it would then make sense to look at the practices of corporate prayer in the 1st century Temple and synagogues. On this issue, Dr. Osborne states

“Jewish patterns of worship and prayer were the natural models for early church worship, and we must begin there if we wish to understand the patterns of early Christian worship.”

As we look at the history of the Hebrews through the Old Testament Scriptures, we see that both the Temple and synagogues were a central part of their lives. The Temple and the synagogues were utilized as places where they would not only worship on the Sabbath, but they would go during the week to participate in prayer. As we look at the Scriptures, it is clear that the Hebrews had a long history of corporate prayer. James Hamilton wrote about corporate prayer in Old Testament Israel. Beginning with Noah, Hamilton traces the use of corporate prayer in Jewish history. At one point he writes, “The covenantal context of corporate prayer—the stage set through Noah and Abraham—continues with Moses and the Levitical priesthood.” As he continues looking at the thread of corporate prayer, he looks at the use of the Psalms in Israel’s worship, particularly that they were used from the perspective of the first person plural. As he moves through Israel’s history, he writes “Other post-exilic writings also showcase corporate prayers, sometimes with fasting, called for by Esther, led by Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel (prayed on behalf of but perhaps not in the presence of the people)”. So with a history of the people of God praying together, it is no surprise that the 1st century Jews continued this practice in the Temple and in the synagogues.

1Ibid., 244.


3 Ibid.
The Temple

The Temple was indeed central to the worship of the Hebrew people. The Temple was viewed by them as the place where YHWH dwelled, and was therefore highly revered.

Osborne writes:

Worshippers would go to the Temple not only for sacrificial offerings but to worship alongside the priests and to pray during the liturgy and at the burning of the incense or the singing of the Levites as well as to cleanse themselves by being sprinkled with “cleansing water” . . . The Torah does not mention accompanying prayers to the free-will and obligatory offerings, but both prayers and the reading of the Torah were added in the Second Temple period. 4

Corporate prayer was certainly part of the worship experience for the Jews when they went to the Temple, especially after the exile. From what we can tell, corporate prayer in the Temple was most likely performed by the priest or a Levite reciting a prayer, and the congregation adding an “amen” or exclamation at the end. Shubert Spero gives some insight into this:

Of particular interest was their formalization and precise verbal formulation of various prayers which in previous periods had been observed by individuals in priestly and prophetic circles. Most influential of all was the serial formulation of what later would be called the Prayer of Eighteen Blessings—the amida (standing) prayer. Each is a brief supplicatory prayer (tefilla) ending with an abbreviated berakha (three words: barukh ata Hashem . . . ) which together express the fundamental needs of the individual and the Jewish nation. Based on traditions which reached back to the three Patriarchs and the public sacrifices in the Temple, this was to be recited back three times a day and became the core of communal prayer. 5

It seems that by the 1st century, many of the prayers offered in the Temple for corporate worship were these prayers of the “Eighteen Blessings.” The New Bible Dictionary gives a bit more insight into these “Eighteen Blessings” which were used in the Temple:

The first of the ‘Eighteen Benedictions’ reads: “Blessed art Thou, the Lord our God, and the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob: the great, the mighty and the terrible God, the most high God Who showest

4 Osborne, 244-245.

5Shubert Spero, “From Tabernacle (Mishkan) and Temple (Mikdash) to Synagogue (Bet Keneset),” Tradition 38, no. 3 (Fall 2004).
mercy and kindness, Who createst all things, Who rememberest the pious deeds of the patriarchs, and wilt in love bring a redeemer to their children’s children for Thy Name’s sake; O King, Helper, Saviour and Shield! Blessed art Thou, O Lord, the Shield of Abraham”. Another prayer is worded: ‘And to Jerusalem, Thy city, Thou wilt return in mercy and wilt dwell in her midst, as Thou hast said. And do Thou build her soon in our days an eternal building, and the throne of David Thou wilt speedily establish in the midst of her.’ The restoration of Israel to the land of their fathers, the return of the Shekinah glory to the Temple and rebuilt city of Jerusalem, and the re-establishment of the Davidic dynasty are recurring themes in the prayers.6

The prayers are shown to be ones in which God was praised and magnified, with petition being given for God continue and further His kingdom while meeting the needs of the individual as well. So, it is clear that communal or corporate prayer was used as a regular part of worship in the Temple on the Sabbath, and the prayers seem to be mainly ones in which the priest or Levite overseeing the worship would pray aloud. The prayers were ones which were used regularly, and were familiar to those who were in worship. Once the priest would finish a prayer, the congregation would respond with some word or words of affirmation. Apparently these prayers were used not only on the Sabbath, but during the week at the appointed times of prayer.

The Synagogues

No one really knows for certain when and where the synagogues originated. Some believe that they began during the Babylonian exile, as a place to worship in absence of the Temple. Others disagree with this being the origin, and there seems to be no common agreement as to why, where, and when synagogues developed. What is known is that by the 1st century, there were many synagogues both in Jerusalem and throughout the Roman Empire where Jews were living. By this time, the synagogues were used as a place of worship and prayer for those Jews who were not able to attend the Temple, or were used by

people for instruction in the Torah who still were in the vicinity of the Temple itself.

According to Allen Myers:

> Synagogues were not intended to replace the cultic center in Jerusalem but, rather, to be places of corporate prayer and instruction in the Torah, led not necessarily by priests or Levites but by those members of the community who were qualified by their learning.\(^7\)

So while the Temple worship was led by the priests and Levites, synagogues were instead led by lay people who were qualified to do so. It is not known what the exact qualifications were for a lay leader in a synagogue, but the leaders were typically chosen or appointed from those considered elders in the Jewish community. John McRay gives more insight into the synagogue by explaining:

> The Mishnah (a collection of rabbinic laws) preserves a tradition that on the Sabbath, a minion (group of 10 men over the age of 13) was required to begin the services. Unlike temple services, these assemblies were characterized by simplicity. There was no official participation by priests or Levites, and no sacrifices were offered. Instead, services were conducted by ordinary members of the community.\(^8\)

Typically, worship at a synagogue would consist of someone reading from the Scripture, someone (often the same person) commenting what was read, and a time of prayer. As is readily apparent, the structure of 1\(^{\text{st}}\) century synagogue worship is not unlike our modern Christian worship services. Grant Osborne gives a bit more information on the nature of these early synagogue services:

> Synagogue worship consisted of praise, prayer, Scripture reading, and homilies. The reading of Scripture was considered the primary purpose of the synagogue. Torah was read on Mondays and Thursdays during the week, as well as every Sabbath and at festivals.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Allen C. Myers, "Synagogue", in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, ed. Allen C. Myers (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1987), 975.


\(^9\) Osborne, 245.
As Dr. Osborne stated, the reading of Scripture seemed to be the primary focus in worship in the synagogue. But as we have already seen, prayer (actually corporate prayer) was also an essential element of worship in the synagogue. According to McRay, the typical worship time in a synagogue began with prayer. The *Shema* was the most well known and most recited prayer for the Jewish people, and they would begin their services by reciting this together. McRay writes:

The Sabbath service likely began with the congregation standing, facing toward Jerusalem, and reciting prayers beginning with the Shema (Deut. 6:4). These verses taken from the Torah were actually more a confession of faith than prayers; the Shema was recited twice daily by adult males. Alternatively, one individual called ‘the ruler’ (head of the synagogue chosen by the synagogue elders) would stand before the ark and recite the Shema aloud while the congregation prayed silently. Then all responded with a loud “Amen”.

Some scholars believe the people would actually open the synagogue service with praise, consisting of Psalms recited or chanted by the people, and then go into reciting the *Shema* (i.e. Osborne). Regardless, after reciting and praying the *Shema*, the one leading this part of the worship would likely go to other aspects of prayer. Many scholars believe that at this point the leader would turn to the “Eighteen Benedictions” which were mentioned earlier as prayers recited in Temple worship. The *New Bible Dictionary* says of this part of synagogue worship:

First, the *Shema* was read. This prayer covers Dt. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Nu. 15:37–41. Then synagogical prayers were recited, the most ancient and best known being the eighteen petitions and benedictions.

In addition to these eighteen benedictions, there were other prayers recited. Some of them were in the form of “blessings”, which would emphasize different aspects of God’s character.

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Typically, these would be recited by people from the congregation, with all in attendance exclaiming “amen” at the end of each. There was also a prayer referred to as the “Qaddish prayer”. Osborne tells us:

This prayer probably developed about the time of Jesus, with surprising echoes of the Lord’s Prayer and perhaps used by Jesus to formulate His master prayer: “Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world, which he created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole household of Israel, speedily and at a near time.”

During the time of prayer in synagogue worship, there were then at least three different aspects: the Shema; the Eighteen Benedictions; the Qaddish prayer. So here we have a fairly clear picture of worship in the 1st century synagogue. In putting this all together, Easton’s Bible Dictionary says:

Where perfected into a system, the services of the synagogue, which were at the same hours as those of the temple, consisted, (1) of prayer, which formed a kind of liturgy, there were in all eighteen prayers; (2) the reading of the Scriptures in certain definite portions; and (3) the exposition of the portions read.

We see that prayer, and specifically corporate prayer, was a major aspect of the Sabbath worship in the synagogues, as well as in gatherings during the work week. Since the synagogues were crucial places in the Jewish communities in both Jerusalem and throughout the Diaspora, it is helpful and important for us to see that corporate prayer was a vital part of the religious experience of the Jews. The early Church looked to the synagogues, at least in part, as an example of how they should structure their times together (both corporate worship and other gatherings). They recognized the importance of the reading of the Word of God, a commentary or exposition on the Scripture, and a time of praying together.

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12 Osborne, 246.
CHAPTER 4
CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE CHURCH IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

In this section, we will look at 13 passages which deal with some aspect of corporate prayer in the book of Acts. In order to develop biblical models of corporate prayer, it will be helpful to look and see what each passage says about God, ourselves, and corporate prayer. Though the answers to these questions won’t be exhaustive, there will be aspects of each that should prove helpful. In dealing with these passages, we will look at questions such as: “What is the background or setting of this passage?”; “What, if anything, does this passage teach about God?”; “What, if anything, does this passage teach about ourselves and how we should respond to God?”; “What can we learn about corporate prayer from this passage?” I will be using the English Standard Version as my main Bible translation.

Acts 1:12-14 (ESV)

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. 13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

At the very beginning of the book of Acts, Luke begins to reveal to his readers the actions of the apostles after the resurrection of Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus appeared to the disciples for a period of 40 days, presenting Himself alive by “many convincing proofs”.
Jesus then told the disciples not to leave Jerusalem until the received what was promised by the Father, referring to their baptism in the Holy Spirit. The disciples asked Jesus if this was the time He would restore Israel to its former glory, but Jesus let them know that they would not know the answer to this inquiry, but the important thing was they would receive power to be His witnesses to the world. After telling them these things, Jesus was lifted up on a cloud as the disciple watched. As they looked into the sky, two “men in white robes” told them that Jesus would return in the same way that they saw Him leave. It is at this point that Luke writes the passage shown above.

The eleven apostles were apparently on the mount called Olivet, which is another term for the “Mount of Olives”. The Mount of Olives was a place mentioned several times in both the Old and New Testaments, and seemed to be a place where Jesus liked to go and teach his disciples. Luke makes a point of telling his readers that the mount was near Jerusalem, “a Sabbath day’s journey away.” According to Richard Longenecker:

The Mishna tells us that travel on the Sabbath was limited to two thousand cubits (Sotah 5:3), which would be somewhere around eleven hundred meters. Therefore we may estimate that the disciples’ journey from the place of the Ascension on Olivet back to Jerusalem was about a kilometer, or about two-thirds of a mile.¹

The disciples then did not have very far to walk to get back to Jerusalem, and one can only ponder what they may have discussed. Though we are not told what they talked about, it can certainly be assumed that they talked about the events which they had just witnessed. What Luke does tell us that as soon as they got back to Jerusalem, they entered the upper room of the place where they were staying.I. Howard Marshall makes these comments about the “upper room” mentioned by Luke:

The disciples had established themselves in an upstairs room in a house in Jerusalem; this would give them privacy (cf.9:37) and would be suitable for prayer (Dan.6:10). Whether this particular room should be identified with that where the Last Supper was held (Luke 22:12—a different Greek word for ‘room’ is used) and located in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, cannot be stated with any certainty.²

So we don’t know for certain to whom the house in which the disciples were staying belonged, but we do know that the place was in Jerusalem, and was well suited for privacy and prayer. Apparently Luke thought it important to let his readers know that all eleven apostles were together to witness the Ascension, and that they were all staying together. The fact that Luke mentioned each of the apostles by name shows the importance in his mind of the unity of the eleven. Luke continues with this idea of unity in verse 14, where he writes “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers”. In saying “all these”, Luke is emphasizing that all eleven apostles were involved in the activity he would mention in this sentence. He goes on to supplement this idea with the phrase “with one accord”. Actually, in Greek this is not a phrase, but a word. The word in Greek is ὁμοθυμαδὸν, which means literally “one or same mind”. This word is only used 11 times in the New Testament, with Luke using it 10 times in the book of Acts. So Luke is telling us that they disciples were all of the “same mind” at this point, further stressing the idea of unity. He then says that the disciples were “devoting themselves to prayer”. In Greek, the word translated here as “devoting” is in the form of a present active participle, and is in the plural. What this tells us is that this act of praying was something they were doing on a regular basis, not just something they did one time after they witnessed the Ascension. The New American Standard Bible translates this phrase as “continually devoting themselves to prayer”, while the New Revised Version of the Bible translates it as “constantly devoting themselves to prayer”. Thus far, we see that the point

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Luke was making was that all of the disciples were unified (the same mind) in praying on a continual or constant basis. On this point, John Calvin makes an observation. He wrote:

Furthermore, Luke doth express two things which are proper to true prayer, namely, that they did persist, and that they were all of one mind. This was an exercise in their patience, in that Christ did make them stay a while, when as he could straightway have sent the Holy Spirit; God doth oftentimes drive off, and, as it were, suffer us to languish, that he may accustom us to persevere.  

It is interesting to note that while Luke could have made his point well in stopping there, he went on to state that the apostles prayed together with the women, and then singled out Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus’ brothers. Here we see early in the book of Acts that women would be a vital part of the ministry in promoting the kingdom of God. Luke made a point of relaying to the readers that the disciples included the women in their continual prayers. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to the role of women in the early Church, it is clear that Luke wanted his readers to know that the women and the family of Jesus were included in these times of united, continual prayer. John Calvin does have an interesting view of this part of the passage, and it is worth a look at what he says about “the women” mentioned by Luke. In Calvin’s opinion, the women who Luke mentions are probably the wives of the apostles who were staying in the house in Jerusalem where the upper room was located. Calvin writes:

Some translate it women; and they think that he speaketh of those which accompanied Christ. As I will not contend with any man concerning this matter, so have I not doubted to prefer that which I thought was more probable. I grant that the word which Luke useth may be interpreted both ways. But this is my reason, why I do think he speaketh rather of wives. . . .

Calvin goes on to say that it makes sense to him that Luke meant the apostles wives rather than “women” in general because their wives would have likely been with them in Jerusalem.

4 Ibid., 56.
at this time, and that they would be looking for the coming of the Holy Spirit as well. Calvin says that since Peter’s wife proved to be a help to him in ministry, it was probably the same for the other apostles as well. The word in Greek used here for “women” (γυναῖκας) is also used to refer to “wives”. Longenecker disagrees with this interpretation, but it does prove to be an interesting possibility. But the main point to our discussion is that the apostles along with Jesus’ family and “the women” (whether the women who followed Jesus, the apostle’s wives, or both) were all praying with the same mind, with devotion, and continually.

What might we learn about God in this passage? It is interesting to see that the disciples and others seemed to immediately devote themselves to prayer. We aren’t told clearly why they did so, but there are several reasons which may be considered. The first is this: in verse two of Acts 1, Luke wrote “…after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:2 ESV). It could very well be that one of the commands that Jesus had given the apostles was to spend time in prayer together. This would make sense based on the apostles’ eagerness to begin spending time in united and constant prayer. Another reason was likely the example they had in Jesus of His commitment to prayer. One of the main characteristics of Jesus was shown to be His consistency in prayer. Osborne writes:

Jesus was more than anything a man of prayer . . . corporate prayer was a critical part of his life and worship, and he made it an essential aspect of the new community, the new Israel, that he inaugurated.⁵

Another reason may have been the commitment to corporate prayer they experienced in the Temple and the synagogues with which they had experience. Whatever the reasons were, what we can learn about God in this passage is that God delights in the prayer of His people.

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and His people were obviously aware of that fact. While Luke did not tell us *what* the apostles and the others prayed for in this passage, one can assume from their Jewish upbringing and their time with Jesus that their prayers were made with a sovereign God in mind.

What can we learn about man in this passage? We certainly can learn something important about these men and women who are mentioned in this passage. It is plain to see that united, corporate, constant prayer was important to this group of early Christians. As we saw above that God delights in the prayer of His people, that man has a need to honor and glorify God in prayer, especially in prayer together with fellow believers. We see that in a time of uncertainty (as these believers were going through), we should approach God for wisdom and guidance. As we see throughout the Scripture, man has a desperate need for God. When circumstances in life seem uncertain, we sometimes have a more urgent motivation to seek God in prayer. At this time in the life of the early Church, life seemed uncertain. It was an appropriate response to seek God together in prayer at this time in the life of the early church.

What can we learn about corporate prayer from this passage? As we have seen, this group of apostles and others showed some important aspects of corporate prayer. First, they showed that they entered into corporate prayer with unity, being of the “same mind.” We have no indication of disunity or disagreement among the people in this passage. We see a group in agreement of what they needed to be doing. Corporate prayer needs to be entered into with a sense of “single mindedness”. Next, we see that corporate prayer was entered into with an attitude of devotion. The Greek word used for “devoting” brings with it the idea of commitment to, attention to, or consistency in something. So, corporate prayer needs to be taken seriously, with attention to being consistent and continual. Lastly, we see in this
passage that all were involved with corporate prayer. Luke made a point of letting us know that all the apostles, all the women, and all of Jesus’ family (or at least his mother and brothers) took part in the times of prayer in which this group of believers was engaged.

Acts 1:23-26 (ESV)

23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Peter had just stood before the believers who had been meeting together, and Luke tells us that it was a group of about 120 people. In his word to them, Peter talked about the fact that Judas having betrayed Jesus was foretold in the Scripture. He then went on to quote Psalm 69 and Psalm 109 to make the point that they should appoint another apostle to take the place of Judas. According to Peter, there were certain requirements which this person must meet. First of all, the person must be a man. Second, he must be one who was with the apostles during the whole time of Jesus’ ministry, from Jesus’ baptism to His Ascension. Third, this man was to act as a witness, with the rest of the apostles, to the resurrection of Jesus. This means he not only had to have been a witness to the resurrected Christ, but would be a man who would be involved in telling others of His resurrection. It is at this point that we pick up the passage quoted above.

Apparently the congregation of 120 persons agreed with Peter’s assessment of what they needed to do regarding the appointment of a man to take the place of Judas. We see then in verse 23 that they put forward two men who met the qualifications which Peter had laid out. At this point, it is a little ambiguous as to whether “they” (in “they put forward”) refers to the whole congregation or to the apostles specifically. In the reading of the passage, it
seems to indicate that the whole congregation put forward the two men, since it seems clear that Peter was addressing the whole congregation when he was making this appeal.

Longenecker has a different view here however. He writes:

The fifth-century Western text in its reading *estesen* (in line with a growing monarchial emphasis) understood that Peter “proposed” the two candidates to succeed Judas. But by far the better reading is *estesan*, “they proposed”, most likely meaning by “they” the eleven apostles together (note the three occurrences of the pronoun “us” with reference to the apostles in vv.21-22).6

Longenecker’s point is twofold in that it was not Peter who put forward the two candidates, but instead it was the eleven apostles who put them forward (and not the congregation at large). But whether it was the congregation or the apostles who put forward two men to take Judas’ place, these two men did meet the strict requirements to be an apostle. It is interesting here to note that the qualifications Peter gave do not involve the “character” of the men, but only that they were with the apostles and Jesus the whole time. In his letters to Timothy and Titus, the apostle Paul gives the qualifications for both elders and deacons. As one looks at these qualifications, one sees many aspects of the person’s character being addressed. But in this passage in Acts 1, we’re not told of such qualifications for the apostle to take the place of Judas. It may very well be that since there only 120 people at this point, and far fewer who fit the qualifications Peter gave for the next apostle, that the character of such men was evident and not an issue of concern. Also, it is plain from the text that the Lord was the One who would make the final decision as to who was to be Judas’ replacement. Since Jesus was the One who chose the twelve to begin with, He would also be the One to choose the next apostle. Jesus knew the character of the original apostles, and He knew the character of the two men who were brought forth as candidates for apostleship.

6Longenecker, 265.
When the people (or the apostles) brought forth two men who fit the requirements to be an apostle, the text tells us that they prayed. We can safely assume from the passage that the whole assembly prayed here for wisdom in the choice of the next apostle. Even if it was only the apostles who put forth the two candidates, the emphasis in this text lends itself to the conclusion that the assembly as a whole entered into prayer together. In fact, that is one of the major truths which Luke was teaching his readers. Luke records these words as the congregation prayed: “And they prayed and said, ‘You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’” (Acts 1:24-25 ESV).

The first aspect of the prayer which Luke records is the congregation acknowledging that the Lord knows the hearts of all. The sense here is not so much that they acknowledged that God knows their own hearts, as much as it is that God knows the hearts of the two candidates put forward. John Calvin comments on this verse saying:

> Therefore, although they were both of honest conversation, yea, although they did excel in holiness and other virtues, yet because the integrity of the heart, whereof God alone is the knower and judge, is the chief, the disciples pray that God would bring that to light which was hidden from men.\(^7\)

The people of the assembly understood that God knows all the inner thoughts and attitudes of man, and that there is no one who can hide these from Him. It has been said that in Scripture, the word “heart” refers to the very center of a person’s life; the controlling center of a person. They knew that God not only knew their own hearts, the center of their very being, but knew the hearts of the two men they were considering. With this in mind, the people showed their trust in an omniscient God as they addressed Him in prayer together.

\(^7\)Calvin, 70.
After first addressing God and acknowledging His attribute of omniscience regarding the hearts of man, Luke tells us they went on to a request. Their request was to “show which one of these two you have chosen. . . .” In this phrase, there are two very positive words which point to the Lordship of Christ. The first word is translated as “show” in English. The Greek word used here by Luke is ἀνάδειξον, which is only used twice in the New Testament, and both times by Luke. In this context, the word is translated to mean “show” or “clearly show”. The other time it is used by Luke is in his gospel, Luke 10:1. This reads “After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.” (Luke 10:1 ESV). The word translated as “appointed” in this verse is the same word which Luke used in Acts 1:24 and is translated there as “show.” While “context is king” in translating and interpreting, it is interesting to see that this word ἀνάδειξον also carries with it the idea of “appointment” as well as “show.” So the congregation was asking the Lord to “make it clear” whom He wanted in the position of apostle. The other positive word here is “chosen.” Those in the assembling knew that it was the Lord who chose those who would serve Him, and they showed confidence in their prayer that God had already chosen who the next apostle was to be.

With this confidence that God had already chosen one to be the next apostle, and that God would show them which of the two it was to be, they cast lots. This is an odd-sounding action to 21st century Christians, but it really wasn’t odd for this assembly to have done so. We need to remember that at this point in the history of the Church, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given. Along with that, these early believers were steeped in Jewish tradition and practice. According to Longenecker:
The practice was common within Israel and the ancient world, generally, and is probably best illustrated by Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

The practice to which Longenecker was referring is “casting lots” in order to make a decision. In the *New Bible Commentary*, D.A. Carson writes:

> The use of “chance” to make such a major decision strikes us as odd, but there are two important things to be kept in mind. First, this is before the giving of the Holy Spirit, and for these Jewish people Proverbs 16:33 would seem to endorse such a way of prayerfully submitting the decision-making process to God’s will. Secondly, the casting of lots came only after the disciples had done their best to specify the qualifications and identify the most suitable candidates. In other words, the lot was not used to decide between the 120 but between two “short-listed” candidates with equal qualifications.

So, the casting of lots at this point in the early history of the Church was not odd to them; on the contrary, they were doing the very best they could to ascertain the will of the Lord. Luke then tells us that the lot fell to Matthias, and he then was regarded as one of the twelve. There is no indication from the text that either the apostles or the assembly of believers had reservations of Matthias taking this position. In fact, the indication is that they were satisfied that God had made His choice clear to them.

What can we learn about God from this passage? The first thing we see is that God knows the hearts of all people. The assembly acknowledged this as they addressed the Lord in prayer. God knows our thoughts, our character, our sins, our strengths, our weakness, etc. Nothing is hidden from His sight. In his gospel, Luke himself records Jesus as saying “For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.” (Luke 8:17 ESV). We also learn that God is the One who chooses Matthias to replace Judas as an apostle. This was ultimately not the decision of the assembly,

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8Longenecker, 266.

or of the other apostles. Luke wanted his readers to know that this was a decision of the Lord. In this regard, we also learn that God desires to make His will known to His children. While we may not use the action of casting lots anymore, the Lord promises to guide His Church, which was made evident in His clear choice of Matthias.

What then can we learn about ourselves from this passage? We learn we must be in submission to God, and trust Him for His leading. While the congregation used their best wisdom to recommend two people for apostleship, they realized that ultimately God would make the final decision. While it is important that we as part of the Church use our minds and reason as best we can, we still need to ultimately rely on God for wisdom and guidance. We also learn that we must pray with confidence, as was the example of the people in this passage. Additionally, we need to understand that God knows the heart of all people, including our own. We must remember that we need to honor God with all of our thoughts, speech, and actions, and that we cannot hide any of these things from Him. We must also realize that while someone may seem to be the “perfect fit” for a ministry role, God knows the heart of the person. We need to seek Him as a body in appointing someone to ministry.

What can we learn about corporate prayer from this passage? First, we see the example that the early Church was quick to gather as a group to pray about an important decision. As a response to their leadership, the people sought the Lord regarding the two men they put forward. Often we have the tendency to make decisions and ask God to bless them. In this passage, we see the opposite attitude. We see the people of God making decisions as best they could, but then asking God for the right direction or decision. In praying corporately we need to have an attitude of reliance on God. We also see in this prayer that the people began with acknowledging one of the attributes of the Lord. In this passage, they acknowledged His omniscience, particularly regarding the hearts of men. It is good practice
to remember and honor God by verbalizing His greatness as we go to Him in prayer corporately. And as stated above, the assembly prayed with confidence that God would indeed show them what He wanted for the Church at this time. James wrote this to his readers: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:5-6 ESV). Though this passage in James is referring specifically to those who are facing various trials and in need of wisdom, the general principle of praying with confidence still stands. So, when we pray corporately, we are to go to prayer quickly, we are to address God in relation to His attributes, we are to go in reliance upon Him, and in confidence that He will indeed direct and guide us.

\[\text{Acts 2:42 (ESV)}\]

\[42 \text{And they devoted themselves to the apostles'} teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.}\]

Pentecost had come, and Luke explains that all the believers were together in one place. At this time, God sent forth His Holy Spirit upon the believers, and did so in a dramatic and public way. According to Luke, there was a loud sound of wind rushing, and the Holy Spirit appeared as tongues of fire resting upon each of the young Christians. As this happened, the believers began to speak of the mighty acts of God in other languages which were understood by people from other nations who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time. The people of Jerusalem were both amazed and confused, and Peter then addressed the crowd. With clarity and boldness, Peter preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who stayed to listen. While some thought the believers were drunk and thus acting in strange ways, Peter preached from the Scriptures that this was a fulfillment of prophecy. Luke tells
us that many people responded positively to Peter’s message, and about three thousand people received his word and were baptized! It is right after this news of the three thousand coming to Christ that Luke tells his readers “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Luke goes on to say that the believers all shared things in common, took care of one another, and even attended the Temple together. He ends this passage by saying “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47b). In the midst of an exciting and explosive growth in the size of the Church, Luke relates to his readers that one of the things these early disciples were devoted to was “the prayers.” John Stott comments on this passage saying:

That is, their fellowship was expressed not only in caring for each other, but in corporate worship too. Moreover, the definite article in both expressions (literally, ‘the breaking of the bread and the prayers’) suggests a reference to the Lord’s Supper on the one hand (although almost certainly at that early stage as part of a larger meal) and prayer services or meetings (rather than Private prayer) on the other. There are two aspects of the early church’s worship which exemplify its balance.10

In saying the early Church devoted themselves to “the prayers,” Dr. Stott tells us that this likely meant that they held corporate prayer meetings. In this verse (Acts 2:42), as we saw in Acts 1:14, the Greek word translated “devoted” is a present active participle, showing that this was an ongoing action or practice. The point Luke is making here is that the people in early Church, after the addition of three thousand, were continuing to devote themselves to praying together. Longenecker puts it this way: “The verb translated ‘devoted’ (proskartereo) is a common one that connotes a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action.”11 So in this passage we get a picture of the early Church, growing explosively after

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11 Longenecker, 289.
Pentecost, being devoted to the teaching of the apostles, devoted to fellowship among one another, devoted to celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and devoted to praying together. John Calvin writes about corporate prayer here in commenting on this passage:

> It is certain he speaketh of public prayer. And for this cause it is not sufficient for men to make their prayers at home by themselves, unless they meet together to pray; wherein consisteth also the profession of faith.¹²

There are things we can learn about God even in this one verse of Scripture. As we saw in the greater passage, God caused the growth of the early Church when He sent His Holy Spirit to indwell believers. What this verse tells us is that, as God was growing His Church, He apparently made it known to them how He was to be worshipped. Though it doesn’t say this directly in the passage, it is certainly implied in seeing how the Church responded to His working in their lives. The Lord made it clear to these early believers that to give Him proper worship, they were to be devoted to continuous learning from the apostles teaching, constant fellowship with one another, regular and consistent celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and continual prayer together. God not only desires to be worshipped by His children, but He makes it clear how His children should accomplish that. We also learn from the greater passage in Acts 2 that when God is worshipped properly, He causes growth in the Church. Though He might not always act in ways that bring three thousand to Himself on a single day in one particular location, He will still be active in adding to the Church at large day by day those who are being saved.

We can learn some things about ourselves here as well. In the passage at large, we learn that man has a need to be indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit. When we worship God by being devoted to the apostles teaching, fellowship with one another, celebrating the Lord’s Supper together, and spending time in prayer together, all the time being indwelt and

¹²Calvin, 128.
empowered by the Holy Spirit, God will be honored, pleased, and will display His works. People can learn God’s truth, fellowship, participate in the Lord’s Supper, and pray, but without reliance on the Holy Spirit it is not true worship. In short, we need to trust in God’s Spirit. Additionally, we see in this passage that man was designed to worship God together with one another. All of the actions which Luke described here were done in community, not alone. The body needs to worship God together!

We see again that corporate prayer was one of the things to which the people in the early Church were devoting themselves. Praying together is mentioned in this passage as one of the primary ways to worship God. Without all four of the actions mentioned in this verse, our worship of God will be left lacking.

Acts 3:1-3 (ESV)

1Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms.

After telling his readers how the early Church grew and worshipped (including corporate prayer), Luke immediately relays an account which includes prayer. As he tells us, Peter and John were going to the Temple at the assigned hour of prayer. The implication here is that Peter and John were going to pray. As we saw in the introduction to this paper, the early Church not only used the example of the Temple and the synagogues from which to pattern their worship services, but they often times attended Temple and synagogue worship as well. This passage is an example of that very situation. In fact, in Acts 2:46 we read “And day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46 ESV). Author BobUtely wrote:
It was the habit of all of the early disciples to go to the Temple daily (cf. Luke 24:53; Acts 2:46). The original followers of Jesus in Palestine worshiped (1) in the Temple (at least on special days if not daily); (2) in the local synagogue (every Sabbath); and (3) with believers on Sunday. This was the pattern for a long period of time.\footnote{Robert James Utely, \textit{Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts}, vol. 3B, \textit{Study Guide Commentary Series} (Marshall, TX.: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 49.}

There were three stated times for prayer at the Temple. The first was in the early morning, and was connected with the morning sacrifice. The second was at the ninth hour, and was connected to the evening sacrifice. The third time of prayer was at sunset. John Calvin believed that Peter and John did not come to the Temple to pray because it was “the rite of the law,” but did so because the discipline of prayer was important to the early Church (as it should be now!). Calvin wrote:

First, in that the Lord would have the older people to observe the appointed hours, we gather thereby that the Church cannot be without certain discipline. And even at this day, were it profitable for us to have such meetings daily, unless our too much sluggishness did let us.\footnote{Calvin, 136.}

Calvin was saying that in the early Church, the older people who could attend the daily prayers in the Temple were encouraged to do so, and that the Church in his day could learn from that example. The Church in America today also has much to learn from that example. The main point of this passage is that Peter and John healed a man lame from birth as they went to the Temple to pray. Luke wants his readers to see the signs and wonders which God was doing through the apostles empowered by the Holy Spirit. As we have already seen in Acts 2, the Church was worshipping together, including praying corporately. As Luke moves on to what happened in Acts 3, it is no coincidence that Luke tells us the apostles were going to the Temple to pray. At this point in its development, prayer, especially corporate prayer, was very important to the young Church.

Is there anything we can learn about God from this short passage? We can see the fact that God used the miracle of healing to show His greatness to the people at the Temple and in the surrounding area. When we take into account the end of Acts 2 which shows the practice of corporate prayer in the Church, and the fact that in Acts 3 Peter and John were going to the
Temple to pray, we realize that in part God was responding to the prayers of His people in His healing of the lame man. It is not a stretch to look at this passage (with its surrounding passages) and say that God is One who answers prayer. We can also see the compassion of God in His healing of this lame man. We also see His compassion for the people in that He had Peter use this miracle as an opportunity to preach the gospel to the many who were there. Anywhere the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached, God’s compassion for sinful man is proclaimed.

Can we learn anything about ourselves in this passage? There are perhaps a few things we can take from this text about people. First, the fact that Peter and John were going to the Temple to pray shows the understanding of man’s need to trust God for wisdom, guidance, and strength. Obviously Peter and John understood the importance of prayer, and went to take advantage of the opportunity to pray at the Temple on this day. Next, this passage shows man’s need to be made whole by God. In this situation, God healed a man lame from birth. Not only did this display God’s power over the physical realm, but it showed the deeper truth that God has the power to make man whole spiritually. The man healed was lame physically; people without Jesus Christ are lame spiritually.

What do we learn about corporate prayer? We learn that the Church was developing the discipline to pray together and continually. Not only would the Church as a whole pray together (as we saw in earlier passages), but we see church leadership (Peter and John) going to spend time in prayer together as well. Corporate prayer does not always involve the whole church, but smaller segments of the body as well (in this case leadership).

Acts 4:23-31 (ESV)

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 26 ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 27 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— 28 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 29 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 30 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your
word with all boldness, \textsuperscript{30} while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." \textsuperscript{31} And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

In this passage, we get a good look into how the early Church actually prayed when they were together. This text is a continuation of the previous text we looked at above. In that passage, Peter and John had gone to the Temple at the time of prayer, and encountered a man lame from birth. When they healed the man, they went into the outer courts of the Temple and Peter began to tell them the great news of Jesus Christ. While they were speaking to the people, Luke tells us that the priests, Sadducees, and the captain of the Temple guard came to the apostles and arrested them. The next day “their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.” (Acts 4:5-6). These men then questioned Peter and John about the healing and their teaching. Because they could not deny that a great miracle had taken place, the rulers then threatened the apostles and commanded them to no longer speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Peter and John told them that they must do what God had called them to do, and they were released from custody. Luke relays that in all, about five thousand men believed after Peter had preached.

The passage we are looking at now picks up after Peter and John were released. The text says they went to “their friends” to report what had happened and what the authorities said to them. The Greek word used here which the English Standard Version translates as “friends” is ἰδίους, which literally means “their own”. So Luke is saying here that Peter and John returned to either the other apostles, or to the church at large. John Stott writes: “On their release, Luke tells us, they went straight to their own people, their relatives and friends in Christ.”\textsuperscript{15} So it is likely that they returned to the church, which included friends, relatives,

\textsuperscript{15}Stott, 99.
apostles, etc. As they returned, one can see a sense of excitement as to what God had done. At the same time, Chrysostom sees humility in their report to the church. He wrote:

> They did not go about boasting and say, “How we settled the discussion with the priests!” They were not ambitious for honor but “went to their friends.” See how they do not throw themselves upon temptations, but when temptations present themselves endure them with courage. Had it been one of the other disciples, perhaps he might have been emboldened by the crowd’s boldness to act with arrogance and speak countless harsh words. But not these, who are true philosophers and do everything with mildness and with gentleness.  

Peter and John went back to the church, and with both excitement and humility told what God had done. At this point, the church then immediately turns to prayer. This was obviously another example of corporate prayer, since Luke wrote “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God. . . .” Regarding this time of corporate prayer, Marshall gives this insight:

> Although the prayer is ascribed to the church as a whole, it is hard to believe that a whole group could speak together in this way without some form of written prayer available for them all to read simultaneously or without a common form of words being learned off by heart previously; the view that the Spirit inspired each member to say exactly the same words reflects an impossibly mechanical view of the Spirit’s working. It is, therefore, more likely that one person spoke in the name of the whole company.

Looking more closely at what the church prayed here can give us some insights into how we are to pray. First of all, the text says that “they lifted their voices together to God”. Again we see the emphasis on the fact that the people were praying together. It also seems from the text that they prayed quickly after they heard the news from Peter and John. So we see here a desire to turn to prayer corporately. It is interesting that in addressing God in this prayer, Luke records that they used the Greek word δέσποτα in verse 24 instead of the usual κύριος.

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17 Marshall, 110.
which is the usual word used for “Lord” in the New Testament (and used in verse 29). The word they used here in addressing God has more of the meaning of “owner or absolute ruler” than the other word normally used. The English Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version both translate this word as “Sovereign Lord,” and that seems to be an accurate rendering of the word. In the face of the persecution they were now facing, the church recognized God’s sovereignty. In fact, they first recognized His sovereignty over His creation, as they refer to Him as the One “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” So the people acknowledged God’s sovereignty over all of creation, and then began to pray about the current situation they were facing by quoting Scripture, specifically Psalm 2:1-2. It is only after referring to the sovereignty of God over creation that they acknowledge His sovereignty over the events taking place. In verse 29 we read that the rulers had gathered together “to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” The people now showed their understanding that not only was God in control of what He created, He was in control of what was happening since He had predestined this to take place. So the church was praying with great confidence in God in the midst of this new persecution. The next key point of their prayer is what they actually asked God to do. They continued, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” The church asked God to give to them boldness in order to continue speak the word, while He continued to show Himself through miracles. They knew they needed to continue to preach the gospel, and that God would continue to perform mighty acts. This is a great picture that Luke paints of how we are to pray, both privately and corporately. They did not ask God to spare them from persecution or to protect them from harm. They did not speak prayers of imprecation, nor ask
God to stop the persecution. They only asked God to “look upon their threats” as He gave the church boldness. And then we see another sign of God’s power and presence. The text tells us that the place where they were was shaken, and that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. Here we are shown a fast and mighty answer to the prayers of the church. Not only does God shake the place where they were (which shows His acceptance of their prayer and His presence with them), but He gives them the boldness they asked for through the filling of the Holy Spirit. They prayed the right way, for the right things, and God answered in dramatic fashion.

There are several things we can learn about God in this passage. One of the aspects of God’s character can be seen in the prayer of the people. They refer to Him as “Sovereign Lord,” recognizing His ownership of all things. The prayer also shows God’s control over the events and situations of the day. So we learn from this that God is indeed sovereign, and we can trust that He will work all things according to His will. We also learn from the prayer that God had planned and predestined what would happen in their situation. One can draw the conclusion from this that God has planned and predestined events and situations where we may find ourselves. He is a God who is in control, working out His plans which He has predestined. And along with His predestination of events, we also see that God responds to the prayers of His people. Specifically, we see that He responds when prayer is given with the proper respect for God’s character, and when done with humility. We see that God does answer prayer, and sometimes does so quickly and dramatically.

There are also things we can learn about ourselves in this passage. To begin with, Luke shows us that Peter and John went to the church as soon as they were released. It is presented as if they did not go off by themselves to pray or sulk, but went to their friends for support and to bring them the news. Luke presents this in such a way that it is clear this was
the appropriate response on the part of Peter and John. We are also shown that the immediate response of the people of the church was to enter a time of prayer together. While they may have been tempted to gloat over what God had done, or to cower in fear because of the threats of the Jewish leaders, the people addressed God appropriately and asked for boldness to continue the work to which God had called them. We are then told that these early believers did in fact continue to speak God’s word boldly to the people in Jerusalem. So we see in this passage a great example of how people should respond to God, in both times of excitement and times of crisis (of which they were facing both).

There are obviously things we learn about corporate prayer in this passage as well. First, we are told that the people lifted their voices “together”. The word translated “together” is the Greek word ὁμοθυμαδὸν. This word carries with it the idea of “one mind” or one purpose”. So the idea Luke is portraying here is not just that the people were together physically, but that they were of one mind in their prayer. So we see here again the idea of unity in the time of corporate prayer, and not just all the people being in the same place. Another aspect of corporate prayer which is seen is the idea of addressing God’s character as we pray with one another. The people in this passage addressed God as their “Sovereign Lord”, and recalled that He was indeed owner of all creation and in charge of all events. They reminded themselves that He has a plan which has been predestined by Him. By remembering these attributes of God while in prayer, it helps us to remember and better identify who it is we are addressing with our prayers. D.A. Carson comments on understanding the Sovereignty of God in prayer. He wrote:

The perverse and the unbeliever will appeal to God’s sovereignty to urge the futility of prayer in a determined universe; they will appeal to passages depicting God as a person (including those that speak of his relenting) to infer that he is weak, fickle, impotent, and once again concluding that it is useless to pray. But the faithful will insist that, properly handled, both God’s sovereignty and his personhood become reasons for more prayer, not reasons for abandoning prayer. It is worth praying to a
sovereign God because he is free and can take action as he wills; it is worth praying to a personal God because he hears, responds, and acts on behalf of his people, not according to the blind rigidities of inexorable fate.¹⁸

Still another helpful thing is the use of Scripture while praying. The church used Psalm 2 as they were bringing their petition before God, and it is always a good practice to quote Scripture as we pray to our Sovereign Lord. When we remember His attributes and His Word while in prayer, we will be more focused and more pertinent in our prayer. Lastly, it was shown that the church prayed for the right things. They asked for that which would bring God glory, and not for things that would make life easier for them. Luke tells us that they asked specifically for boldness in speaking God’s word to the people, and that is exactly what He granted them. It is important for us to see how God gave them boldness as well. Luke made it a point to write that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” as they spoke with boldness. An application we can take from that is to ask God to fill us with His Spirit as we enter into prayer and as we look forward to serving Him. Another application is the fact that at times it is important to be specific in the requests we bring before God. In this case, the church was specific in their request for boldness in preaching the gospel. It is appropriate to ask God for specific things, especially when we know they are things He wills for us.

Acts 6:3-6 (ESV)

³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

¹⁸D.A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2008). 165
The context of this passage, Luke tells us, is that the number of believers was continuing to increase. As they were increasing, the church was offering food for those who needed it. An issue arose in which the Greek speaking Jews (Hellenists) brought complaint against the Hebrews because the Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the distribution of the food. It is at this point in the situation that the verses shown above apply. The text tells us that the twelve apostles spoke to the rest of the disciples and instructed them to pick seven men of good character to oversee the distribution of the food. In this passage, there are actually two references to prayer.

The first reference to prayer is in verse four, where the apostles said “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” Once again, we see this idea of the apostles being devoted to prayer. We have already seen this wording used in Acts 1:14 and Acts 2:42. For the third time in six chapters, Luke again makes the point that the people of the early church were devoted to prayer. In his commentary on the book of Acts, John Stott states that he believes that the apostles’ devotion to prayer included corporate prayer. He says:

It is noteworthy that now the Twelve have added prayer to preaching (probably meaning public as well as private intercession) in specifying the essence of the apostles’ ministry.19

John Franklin picks up this idea as well. He writes:

The apostles were not referring to their personal prayer life but to the ministry of mobilizing the people of God to pray together. They were declaring that the two ministries they especially must do as church leaders were mobilizing the church to pray and preaching/teaching the Word of God.20

19Stott, 121.

20 Franklin.
Franklin goes on to make two main points to support his claim. First, he states that the context of verse four revolves around ministries, since the issue at hand was the ministry of distributing food. Second, he states that even though the word “ministry” does not occur before the word “prayer” in the Greek text, the definite articles does. The Greek text of Acts 6:4 reads like this: \( \text{ἡ μεῖξις δὲ τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου προσκαρτερήσομεν}. \) To this, Franklin contends:

The verse reads “But we to the prayer and the diakonia of the word will steadfastly continue”. They do not mean prayer in general; rather they have something specific in mind. The syntax creates the possibility that prayer and the word are twin ideas.\(^{21}\)

So Franklin believes that because the definite article is used in both cases (i.e. the prayer and the ministry of the word), that “the prayer” quoted by Luke is the ministry of public or corporate prayer. It seems that Franklin could indeed be right, especially in light of the fact that as we have observed, corporate prayer played a large part in the early church in the book of Acts.

The second reference to prayer seen in this passage is in verse six: “These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.” The people had chosen seven men with the qualities put forth by the apostles, and these men were then presented to the apostles. We see here the importance of this ministry in the minds of the apostles by the action they took. Once again, prayer was their first action when setting these men to work. Though it is uncertain from the grammar as to who prayed for and laid hands on the seven, it was likely the apostles who did so since the text says that they brought the seven to the apostles. Commenting on this verse, Calvin said:

This is referred unto the apostles, for all the people did not lay their hands upon the deacons; but when the apostles did make prayer in the name of the Church, others also did add their petitions.\(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\)Ibid.

\(^{22}\)Ibid.
So, at least in Calvin’s judgment, prayer was likely entered into corporately by the whole body of believers in this situation. We do know from the text that at least the apostles prayed before the people, if nothing else. In praying for these men, and laying their hands upon them, the apostles were showing their approval of these men and giving them their support.

There isn’t a lot we learn about God in this passage without straying from the context. We do see that twice Luke mentioned the Holy Spirit, once in connection with the character of the men to look for (full of the Spirit), and once in connection with the character of Stephen in particular. In both instances, Luke used the phrase “full of the Holy Spirit.” The inference here is that these men were not only believers who were indwelled by the Spirit, but men who were empowered by the Spirit and showed the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. There is certainly implication here that God indwells His people with His Spirit. So one of the aspects we see of God here is His immanence with His people. We also see the implication that God empowers His people for ministry through the Holy Spirit. God doesn’t just call us to serve Him; He also empowers us to do so. The passage also mentions the quality of being full of wisdom. Again, the implication is that God is the One who gives us the wisdom we need in serving Him. This leads right into what we learn about man in this passage. As just mentioned, the Holy Spirit is both our source of new life and our empowerment in serving God. We are to live in such a way that the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives is evident to others. In order to take on leadership roles in the church, we need to be (or look for in potential leaders) people who are full of the Spirit and wisdom. In addition, we are to be people who pray together as well as individually.

22Calvin, 238.
Regarding corporate prayer, we are shown once again the idea of being devoted to prayer, and specifically to corporate prayer. We are to be quick to pray corporately, and we are to be steadfast in doing so. E.M. Bounds commented:

In Acts, chapter six, it is translated, “Give yourselves continually to prayer.” There is in it constancy, courage, unfainting perseverance. It means giving such marked attention to, and such deep concern to a thing, as will make it conspicuous and controlling.\textsuperscript{23}

We are also to pray corporately for others being commissioned into ministry, and we are to follow the example of our leaders in doing so. We learn too, if Franklin is correct in his assertion, that corporate prayer is to be one of the foundational ministries of the church.

Acts 8:14–17 (ESV)

\begin{quote}
14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John,\textsuperscript{15} who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit,\textsuperscript{16} for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.\textsuperscript{17} Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.
\end{quote}

The background of this passage is that there was a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem, and Luke writes that “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” (Acts 8:1b) Stephen had been killed, and Saul was causing much turmoil for the early believers. Philip went to Samaria, and there he began to preach the gospel. The text says that many people believed and were baptized there under Philip’s ministry, including Simon, a former magician. It is here that the passage which we are now studying comes into play. The apostles has stayed in Jerusalem during the time of this persecution, but when they heard what was happening in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to help out. This is the first time the gospel had spread to Samaria, and was the beginning of the

promise that Christ gave to the disciples in Acts 1:8. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with questions surrounding the reasons that these new Christians had not yet received the Holy Spirit when they believed. The important issue in this paper is to see that Luke records Peter and John prayed for these Samaritans, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Luke does not share with his readers any details of what Peter and John talked about or taught these Samaritan believers, and only tells us that they had only been baptized in the name of Jesus at this point. But Luke does make the point that Peter and John prayed for them, and this was obviously important enough to Luke to include this bit of information. It is worth noting here that the Jews and the Samaritans has little dealings or interactions with one another. The Jews did not like the fact that the Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles, and felt that the Samaritans were not included in the people of God. Many Jews would not even set foot inside Samaria because of this. But here we see the apostles, namely Peter and John, going without hesitation (as far as we can tell) to Samaria to see what God was doing there in the lives of these Samaritans. Once they arrived at the place where Philip and these new converts were, Peter and John prayed for them, and specifically that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Again, while we will not discuss here all the ideas and ramifications of why the new Christians did not receive the Holy Spirit the moment they believed, it is important for this study of corporate prayer to understand that Peter and John prayed publicly for these Samaritans to have the fullness of God in their lives. Though this particular wording isn’t used in this passage, this is essentially what the apostles desired for these new members of the body. And though Luke only records that Peter and John prayed, one may assume that it is implied that others (especially Philip and any who many have come to Samaria with him) prayed along with them, if only silently.
One can learn some exciting things about God from this passage. First of all, it is made clear that God was fulfilling His word through Jesus that the disciples would be His witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the remotest parts of the world. God is definitely faithful to bring about what He says and plans to do! We also see in this God’s desire to build His Church with people from any ethnicity who will believe. God desires to be worshipped and praised by people of all “tongues and tribes”. We also see that God will use varied events to spread His gospel to the world. In this case, He used the great persecution in the church at Jerusalem to bring the gospel to the people of Samaria. Though the people of the church were being persecuted (some to the point of death), God used this for His glory. We see again that God desires to use His children in spreading the gospel to people around the world.

We can learn some things about ourselves in this passage as well. Philip went to Samaria because he was fleeing the persecution in Jerusalem. But what Luke writes about Philip is both encouraging and convicting. Luke said “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.” (Acts 8:4-5 ESV). Luke and others didn’t just flee the persecution; they used their fleeing as an opportunity to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to those they met. Too often when we Christians experience persecution for following Jesus Christ, we shrink back, get depressed, feel sorry for ourselves, or get hung up on asking “Why?” We aren’t told in this passage if Philip and the others dealt with any of these feelings themselves, but it is certainly possible that they may have. We are told, however, that they obeyed God by bringing the great news of Christ to the places they went. How great would it be if the believers in the churches of America today had the same outlook and motivation of those in the early church!

It is also apparent that Luke wants his readers to understand the importance of prayer in
ministry, and particularly in this case public or corporate prayer. Luke portrays Peter and John as being quick to pray; American Christians and churches would do well to follow this example.

This leads us into the aspect of corporate prayer once again. The sense one gets from reading this passage is that of a group of people excited about coming into an intimate relationship with God, and the leaders of the church responding with encouragement and prayer. One can picture this group of new converts standing or kneeling together, as Peter and John pray over them. In this particular case, they prayed that the Samaritans would receive the Holy Spirit. Today, we don’t need to pray in that way for new Christians, since they now receive the Holy Spirit upon believing (or even before believing). Yet it is a good learning tool to see the apostles praying, in essence, that these Christians would have the fullness of God in their lives. It is no stretch to take from this passage that one of the broad applications here is that leaders in the churches should lead their congregations in praying for new converts publicly, should lay hands upon them as a sign of encouragement and approval, and pray that God would continually fill them with the fullness of Himself.

Acts 12:5, 12-17 (ESV)

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. 13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 Recognizing Peter’s voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!” 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.
The church was continuing to grow, and the gospel was preached in Antioch with many people turning to the Lord. While the gospel was spreading throughout the regions outside of Jerusalem, there was intense persecution of the church taking place in Jerusalem. Herod the king was dealing violently with the church, including killing James, the brother of John. When he saw that the Jews were pleased by this persecution, Herod had Peter arrested and put in jail. It is at this point that the passage quoted above begins. Luke writes that Herod’s intention was to keep Peter imprisoned until after the Passover, and then bring him out to the people. So Peter was to be kept in prison for some number of days, and then would likely be put on trial and condemned to death. Luke writes in verse 4 that Peter was guarded by four squads of soldiers, making sure he was secure. Each squad of soldiers consisted of four soldiers each, and each squad would guard him for a four hour shift. These precautions were taken certainly because of what happened in Peter’s previous imprisonment. In Acts 5, Luke shares that the apostles were arrested and put in jail, “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” (Acts 5:19-20). Since the authorities did not want a repeat of what happened in that situation, they secured Peter in the prison with more guards than before. In verse 5, we read that as Peter was in prison, “earnest prayer” was made to God by the church. The word Luke uses which is translated as “earnest” is only used three times in the New Testament, and two of those times are in the context of prayer. The Greek word ἐκτενῶς, and it is used also by Luke in his gospel as he describes Jesus praying in the garden. He wrote “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” (Luke 22:44 ESV).The other time it is used in the New Testament is by Peter when he wrote that the believers should “love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1Peter 1:22 ESV). The word
carries with it the idea of being fervent, of being continuous, and of having intense feelings. So here we see again the idea that the church was praying together or corporately for Peter, and they were doing so earnestly. In other places in Acts we have looked at thus far, several times we have seen the idea of the church being devoted to prayer. Here we see the sense of not only devotion, but having intensity in their prayer as well. In his commentary on this passage, Darrell Bock writes “Prayer is to be seen as a catalyst for the escape and is expressed with an imperfect (en…ginomene) to show its ongoing character.” According to Bock, the sentence also shows the sense of the prayer of the church being continuous.

As we move on to verses 12-17 in this passage, Luke recounts Peter’s rescue from prison by an angel of the Lord. In the night while Peter was sleeping, an angel came, woke him up, and told him to get dressed and follow him. Peter followed the angel past all the guards and out of the prison gates, all the while thinking he was seeing a vision. Once outside the prison, Peter “came to himself” and realized that he had indeed been rescued miraculously from the prison. It is at this point that verses 12-17 begin. Luke writes in verse 12 “When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose othername was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” We don’t know if Peter knew the people of the church would be praying at the house of Mary, but apparently he knew that many would be there. Ben Witherington says of verse 12:

That Peter goes expecting to find Christians meeting at this location suggests this is a regular location of a house church, and this is confirmed by the reference to ongoing gathering and praying at this location.25


Because of the habit of praying together that we have seen thus far in the early church, it is safe to assume that Peter thought they would be there praying for him. So here again we are shown the priority of and commitment to corporate prayer that the young church possessed. At this point in the story, we see a humorous chain events take place. When Peter came to the house, he knocked at the gate. A servant girl (Rhoda) heard the knocking, and went to see who was there. When she saw it was Peter, she got so excited that she forgot to let him in and went back to tell the others that Peter was out of prison and here! Luke records “They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!” But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.” (Acts 12:15-16 ESV). It is obvious from the text that the church did not expect Peter to be released this quickly, and especially at this hour of the night. Peter then described to the church what God had done, and instructed them to tell James and the other believers who were not present at this time of prayer. After this, Luke tells us Peter left for another place. Even though the church was devoted to prayer, and they were praying earnestly, God answered in a way they were not expecting. James, John’s brother, had just been put to death. One can imagine that the church was praying that Peter’s life would be spared. But God did even more; He released Peter in an even more dramatic way than He had previously released the apostles who had been imprisoned.

What can we learn about God in this passage? First, it is seen that God listens to the prayers of His people. The church prayed earnestly, and God not only heard but answered in an unexpected way. God powerfully worked in such a way that Peter was not just spared, but released. He brought Peter back to the church to show the great thing that God had done. He brought glory to Himself in the way He worked in this situation. And in all this, we can assume He greatly encouraged the church to keep praying as they saw His trustworthiness.
God was concerned for the preservation and the growth of His Church, and He worked to take care of those concerns. Would God have worked in this dramatic way to release Peter if the church had not been praying? We don’t know, but we do know that Luke wanted his readers to see the connection between earnest corporate prayer and the mighty working of God. In studying this passage, Chrysostom exclaimed “Look how much they achieved by praying at night.”

26 God wants His children to come to Him in prayer, corporately as well as individually.

What can we learn about ourselves from this passage? First, we again see the importance for the people of God to be praying together. As we saw earlier in this paper, it is important to be devoted to prayer. In this passage, we are also taught that it is important for us to be earnest in our prayers together. We are also reminded that as we pray together, we should have an attitude of expectancy. The people who were praying for Peter at the house of Mary were amazed at the answer to prayer they saw. They were so amazed, that at first they thought that either the girl was wrong who said Peter was at the gate, or they thought that it wasn’t really Peter, but his “angel.” We don’t know if the people in this text were praying with expectancy or not, but we do know they didn’t expect God to answer in the way that He did. So we can learn from this to expect God to answer, but not to try to determine beforehand how He might answer.

When it comes to corporate prayer, we see once again the importance of praying together. Prayer is to be entered into together, even if the whole church is not present at the time. The church consisted of several thousand by the time of this event, and obviously all those people were not present in Mary’s house. In fact, Peter told the people meeting there to let James and the other brothers know what God had done. Corporate prayer does not

26Martin, 155.
necessarily consist of all the believers in a given area praying in same place at the same time. Verse 5 tells us that earnest prayer was being made by the church for Peter. This likely refers to the church as a whole, and not just to those who were at Mary’s house that night. Another aspect of corporate prayer which can be seen here, according to Calvin is:

This place teacheth, first, how we ought to be affected when we see our brethren persecuted by the wicked for the testimony of the gospel, for if we be slothful, and if we be not inwardly touched with their dangers, we do not only defraud them of the duty of love, but also treacherously forsake the confession of our faith. . .27

Calvin reminds us of the importance of praying for those being persecuted for the faith, and by not doing so we are neither showing them love and may be forsaking the faith ourselves. This is a great reminder for Christians to pray corporately for those being persecuted for the gospel. Also, we see in this passage another instance of praying for something specific. Although the text does not explicitly say that the church was praying for Peter’s release, we know form the context that they were praying for Peter as he was in prison. As seen in a previous passage, God answered the specific request in a dramatic way.

Acts 13:1-3 (ESV)

1 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

In the last passage, we saw that Peter was released miraculously from prison. Since Herod was the one who had James killed and Peter arrested, he had his men searching for Peter. The last part of Acts 12 tells of the death of Herod, the persecutor of the young church. Luke reveals that Herod died because he was receiving praise as being a god, and not giving

27 Calvin, 480-481.
glory to the one true God. Luke writes that after the death of Herod, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch to serve in the church there. Luke lists a group of prophets and teachers, who were in the church at Antioch, and he names Barnabas first and Saul last, which was his way of showing the importance of these two men. As he continued to describe the church in Antioch, Luke wrote “As they were worshipping the Lord and fasting. . . ’’ in verse two. Though it is unclear as to who “they” refers in this sentence (the church or the prophets and teachers just mentioned), it is most likely referring to the Antioch church as a whole. In verse three, we read “Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.’’ Here we see the first instance in Acts of fasting being mentioned with prayer; in fact, this passage is the first mention of fasting at all in the book of Acts. Here we see Luke including the practice of fasting as part of corporate prayer. Another interesting factor in this passage is that Luke seems to be including three things together: worship, fasting, and prayer. I would propose here that instead of three things, the text is saying is that fasting and prayer are integral aspects of worship. Instead of worship, fasting, and prayer, there is worship, which incorporates fasting and prayer. John Polhill wrote:

> Although evidence suggests the Jewish practice of fasting was regularly observed in some early Christian circles, the association of fasting with worship suggests a time of intense devotion when normal human activities like eating were suspended.28

So fasting may be a sign of more “intense devotion” in worship. The text also says that it was while the church was worshipping and fasting that the Holy Spirit spoke to them. The passage does not tell us why the church may have been showing more intense devotion in their worship at this point, but it leads one to believe that they were seeking some clear direction or guidance from the Lord as to what He desired for them to do. It was during this time of worship (which included fasting and prayer) that the church was told “Set apart for

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me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Though the wording seems a bit general (for the work to which I have called them), the Holy Spirit was specific in singling out Barnabas and Saul. The church may or may not have had a good idea of what Barnabas and Saul were to do, but they knew clearly that God had some work for them to accomplish. The text then goes on to show that this word from the Holy Spirit was followed by more time of fasting and praying. We are not told how long this period of time was, but there was obviously some interval before Barnabas and Saul left. Marshall wrote:

   The departure of the missionaries was preceded by a further session of prayer and fasting, this time no doubt a period of intercession for their future work.29

So we see that prayer was likely part of the time of worship when the church was seeking the Lord with fasting, and then prayer with fasting was used as intercession for the work of the two men called specifically by God. Additionally, we are told that after praying, they (probably the church leaders) laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul as a sign of approval, support, and commissioning.

   There are some things we can learn about God in this passage. One of the characteristics of the Lord seen here is that He calls people into ministry. In this case, He called both Barnabas and Saul to leave their ministry at Antioch to do other work which He had for them. We see also that God responded to the worship, including fasting and prayer, of the church in Antioch. Though we aren’t told in the passage why they were seeking God so intensely at this point, it is probable that God had working in their midst in such a way that the church and its leaders sensed that God was calling them to something special. It may be that to find out what God had in mind, the church entered into a special time of seeking Him. We have no indication that the church in Antioch was facing particular persecution as the

church in Jerusalem had been, so their commitment to this time of worship, prayer, and fasting must have had some other motivation behind it. But regardless of the motivation of this body of believers, we do know that they were seeking God diligently. Dr. Douglas Kelly touched on the aspect of “wrestling in prayer” in his book *If God Already Knows, Why Pray?*. At one point, he wrote:

> There are times when asking and receiving come automatically and easy, but we have all experienced occasions when that does not happen. It takes effort and determination, even ‘blood, sweat, and tears,’ for things to change.\(^{30}\)

So, sometimes God may cause His people to seek Him intensely, to wrestle with Him in prayer, before He will answer their prayers.

We also learn some things about how we should respond to God. We saw above that John Polhill used the term “intense devotion” as he described what was happening at this time at the church in Antioch. Though the text does not use the term “devotion” here, it is certainly implied when looking at the fact they worshipped with prayer and fasting. Once again, then, it seems Luke desires his readers to understand that corporate prayer involves devotion of the part of the church. We, His children, must be devoted to Him, and show that devotion by the way we seek Him. An interesting phrase is the last one in verse three, which is translated in the English Standard Version as “they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” In Greek, the phrase looks like this: ἐπιθέντες τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῖς ἀπέλυσαν. A literal rendering of this could read “laying the hands on them they released”. While the translation of the ESV is accurate, the wording does carry with it the idea that the church in Antioch was willing to release these men instead of trying to hang on to them for their own purposes.

When looking down to the next verse, it reads “So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit. . . .” (Acts 13:4a). Luke is showing that the Holy Spirit is the One who called the men for a

special ministry, and is also the One who sent them out. However, the church had a role in this process as well. They had to seek the Lord with intense devotion, and then obey God by sending them out (releasing them). We need to make sure that as we seek God, we are willing to obey Him as well. The church had to obey God in sending out Barnabas and Saul, and Barnabas and Saul had to obey God by going. This is a good example in obedience for His people today.

We have probably already touched on the things we can learn about corporate prayer in this passage. First, we are shown that corporate prayer is a major aspect in determining God’s will for His church. We were shown once again the idea of being “devoted” to corporate prayer, though this time it was shown through their action of fasting along with prayer. Luke does not tell us how long the church fasted, but he does say that it was certainly part of their process in worship, in seeking God, and in sending out Barnabas and Saul. At times it is important to incorporate they practice of fasting into a time of praying together as a body of believers. Speaking of fasting with prayer, Kelly wrote:

Fasting is a way of bringing the powerful Christ down from the mountain of glory into our valley of helplessness to do the work we cannot accomplish. But we must keep this in mind: in proper fasting, the emphasis is never on our merits or on our personal feelings as we fast. Rather we should be solely concerned with bringing down the presence of the risen Christ. The stress should be on God’s presence and glory and not at all on ourselves.\(^\text{31}\)

When the church incorporates fasting into its times of praying together, it must be diligent to be focused on God Himself and seeking Him alone. We can also learn from this passage that in sending out others, as we release them to do the work God has called them to do, we should use the practice of corporate prayer. This passage is a good example of the church

\(^\text{31}\)Ibid., 177.
praying to trust God, encourage the men being sent out, and show their support for the work of God.

Acts 14:23 (ESV)

23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

As we saw in the previous passage, Barnabas and Saul (now Paul) were sent out from the church in Antioch to do the work God had for them. Upon leaving Antioch, they went to Cyprus, and there preached the gospel to those in the city of Salamis. From there they went to Antioch in Pisidia, where they preached the gospel. In this city, many believed, but there was much persecution from the Jews. They left this city, claiming that they would now go to the Gentiles. As we get into chapter fourteen of Acts, Paul and Barnabas have made their way to Iconium. Luke tells us that here a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed, but there was great division in the city between those who believed and those who did not. They stayed for a long time teaching and preaching, but when they became aware of a plot to kill them, Paul and Barnabas left and went to Lystra. While preaching there, Paul healed a man crippled from birth. The people of Lystra began to refer to Paul and Barnabas as gods, and wanted to sacrifice to them. Paul and Barnabas used this opportunity to explain the gospel to the people there, but in the meantime Jews came from Iconium and Antioch to stir up the crowds against them. Luke tells us that they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead. However, Paul recovered, and the next day he and Barnabas went to the nearby city of Derbe. The Scripture says that after preaching, they made many disciples in this city. Then Luke writes “When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith,
and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:21b-22). It is at this point in the story that Luke wrote the verse we are considering in this section. Paul and Barnabas decided to return to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (of Pisidia), cities in which they encountered hostile persecution. They did so to encourage the churches, and to appoint elders in each of the churches. According to the text, as they appointed the elders in each church, they did so with prayer and fasting. Once again we see the idea of fasting incorporated with public prayer. David Peterson comments on this saying:

The addition of the words with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust, implies some form of ordination to special responsibility and service.  

As we saw in the previous passage we looked at (Acts 13:1-3), the prayer and fasting of the church was in setting Barnabas and Saul apart for special service, and in sending them out to this ministry to which the Holy Spirit had called them. Here again, we see that prayer and fasting was used in conjunction with appointing the elders to their special responsibility and service. In commenting on fasting with prayer in this passage, Calvin said:

They had a double end and reason of their prayer; the first, that God would direct them with the spirit of wisdom and discretion to choose the best and most meet men. . . they fast likewise, that even that may be a help to stir up the ferventness of their prayers; for we know how great our coldness is otherwise.  

Calvin believed that Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted both for wisdom in making the right appointments to elder, and in making sure their prayers were fervent. We are not told clearly in the text if only Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted in this situation, or if each church body prayed and fasted as well. We do know that Paul and Barnabas certainly prayed and fasted, and it is reasonable to assume that Luke wants his readers to see the church


involved in this as well. In addition to them praying for wisdom for the right decisions (as Calvin said), it is apparent also that the prayer and fasting was for committing them to the Lord for the work of the ministry. Since fasting is normally for some period of time (i.e. a day or longer), we must assume that this process of prayer and fasting was more than just a short prayer for God’s guidance and commissioning. There is again the idea of intense devotion to and continuing of prayer in this passage. The appointment of elders in each church was an important time in the lives and development of these groups of believers. To help ensure they were hearing accurately from God, Paul and Barnabas (and most likely the people of each church) spent some time in prayer and fasting as they discerned the will of God in this matter. While it almost sounds like an off-handed remark by Luke that they prayed, fasted, and committed the elders to the Lord, it is right in keeping with Luke’s revealing of the importance of corporate prayer to the early church. The churches took this aspect, the appointment of elders, so seriously that they were willing to spend time in prolonged prayer and fasting. Archibald Robertson commented:

> It was a serious matter, this formal setting apart of these ‘elders’ in the churches. So it was done in a public meeting with prayer and fasting as when Paul and Barnabas were sent forth from Antioch in Syria (13:3) on this mission tour.34

Though the Lord is mentioned only once in this single verse we are considering, it is apparent that the elders are to be under the ownership and guidance of God. Luke wrote that with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. The Lord is the One who is in authority over the elders, which is why the people were praying and fasting for these men. God is the One who directs and guides His church, and He must be sought in decisions regarding it.

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Concerning ourselves, we again see a great example in seeking the Lord intensely through prolonged prayer and fasting. While we don’t always see this picture of “wrestling in prayer” as Doug Kelly put it, we do see it clearly in both this passage and the previous one. We need to commit our elders to the Lord, realizing that He is the One who will ultimately hold them accountable for their work. We also need to realize that God has appointed elders to be in a position of leadership in the church, and we need to regard our elders as such. But mostly, we see the need to take the appointment of elders seriously, and to work diligently in seeking God to make the right choices in this regard.

As far as corporate prayer is concerned, once again we see the importance of sometimes adding the discipline of fasting to our time of prayer. God desires us to come to Him, both privately and corporately. And at those times when we sense we need to be more intense in our pursuit of God, we may need to come together in fasting and prayer.

Acts 16:13, 16 (ESV)

13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

16 As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.

Paul and Barnabas had just separated over a disagreement concerning John Mark, and Silas joined Paul as he traveled and preached the gospel to the Gentiles. They had just met Timothy, and he joined them in their ministry. At this time, Paul received a distinct call from God to go to Macedonia to bring the gospel to that area of the world. As they arrived in Macedonia, they went first to the city of Philippi. It is at this point that Luke writes the passage we are now considering. As Paul and those with him arrived in Philippi, they went looking for where the Jews in the area might go to pray and worship. It seems that there was
no synagogue here. No building is mentioned, and only a group of women who gathered for prayer are mentioned. Typically, there had to be at least 10 men in order to constitute an official synagogue. For our study, however, the important aspect is that Paul and those with him went to a “place of prayer” on the Sabbath. The question has been raised as to whether Paul and company went with the intent to worship, or if they just went to talk to the Jews about Jesus Christ. Though there is no doubt that one of Paul’s methods in preaching the gospel was to visit the local synagogues, it is important to note that Luke was clear about the fact that they went on the Sabbath. To my thinking, Luke was showing that Paul and his men were going to the place of prayer to worship and pray with the local Jewish congregation. John Stott comments on this, writing: “Anyway, Paul and his friends joined the women for worship on the Sabbath, and sat down waiting to be invited to speak.”

Looking also at verse 16, we see that they went back to the place of prayer, likely on a subsequent Sabbath. We have here a picture of Paul and those with him going to public worship with the local Jews, and Luke referring to it as “the place of prayer”. Obviously Luke wanted to draw attention to the fact that Paul saw the importance of praying with other people. Matthew Henry wrote:

“They were going to prayer, to the house of prayer, or rather to the work of prayer there, v. 16. They went thither publicly, everybody knew whither they were going, and what they were going to do.”

So in this time they were in Philippi, Paul set the example of praying publicly and corporately at “the place of prayer.”

There really isn’t anything that this passage teaches us specifically about God, other than the fact that it is implied again that He wants His people to be in prayer together. We can learn from the example of Paul that it is important to pray corporately, and he and his

35 Stott, 263.

men went looking to find a place to do so. And here we see the emphasis on corporate prayer in the context of corporate worship. We are told specifically in verse 13 that they went looking for the place of prayer on the Sabbath. From that, it can be assumed that in verse 16 it was again the Sabbath when they were going back to the place of prayer. Praying corporately is to be part of our corporate worship.

 Acts 16:25-26 (ESV)

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened.

As Paul and those with him were going to the place of prayer one day, a demon possessed girl began following them and crying out “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” (Acts 16:17b). The text says that this happened for many days, and Paul was annoyed. One day he turned and cast the demon out of the girl, and she was no longer able to make money for her owners by telling fortunes. Because of this, there was uproar in the city, and Paul and Silas were beaten and arrested. They were put in the inner part of the prison, with their feet secured in stocks. It is at this point, with Paul and Silas in pain and discomfort, their feet locked in stocks while they themselves are locked in the inner prison, that Luke writes the above sentences. Though we don’t know what time of day Paul and Silas were beaten and arrested, we are told that it was about midnight when they began to pray and sing hymns to God. Here again Luke draws his readers attention to the practice of the disciples praying aloud, publicly, and together. Though this situation is not a corporate worship service as we saw in the previous passage, we do see
that Paul and Silas used this time to publicly worship God. Peterson reflects on this passage with:

Their praying may have included a cry for justice, release from prison, and the freedom to continue their ministry in an unhindered way. At the same time, singing hymns to God, they acknowledged God’s character and expressed their trust in him as their deliverer. They could have been using any one of a number of Psalms, which combine such prayer and praise.37

This is a very interesting and astute insight into the actions of Paul and Silas. Though Luke does not tell us what they prayed or sang, it would be both proper and the norm of the day for them to be singing one or more Psalms at this time. So here they prayed aloud, very likely extolling God’s character, and then sang words of Scripture for all to hear. Luke does include the fact that the prisoners were listening to them. Here we are shown a time of public and corporate prayer (even though there were only two of them praying) in the presence and hearing of a group of unbelievers. You could say Paul and Silas had a “captive audience!” In the midst of their praying and singing, there was a great earthquake, the doors of the prison fell open, and everyone’s bonds (not just those of Paul and Silas) were loosed. Luke goes on to tell us that the jailer drew his sword to kill himself, assuming the prisoners had escaped. But Paul and Silas told the jailer that they were all still there, and the jailer and his family ended up caring for Paul and Silas and coming to faith in Christ. As you can see, this event is a little different from the one previously looked at concerning Peter. In that one, Luke described that when Peter was imprisoned, the church was praying for him. In this situation, Luke focused instead on the prisoners, Paul and Silas, as praying. The results were similar, though, in that God miraculously opened the doors of the prison and caused for the release and safety of the apostle.

37Peterson, 468.
There are some things we learn about God in this passage. First, we understand once again that God listens to the prayers of His people. God had not abandoned Paul and Silas in the inner prison, but showed Himself powerfully both in the response of the two men to their imprisonment and in the way He rescued them in the sight of so many. God is all powerful, and does not leave His children in their time of suffering. In rescuing Paul and Silas, it seems that He also benefitted the rest of the prisoners. We are told that everyone’s bonds were unfastened, and some may have been released along with Paul and Silas. Often others are blessed in the process of God caring for His people.

As Peterson pointed out above, in praying and singing hymns, Paul and Silas acknowledged God’s character and expressed their trust in Him. This is a very good example and exhortation for Christians today to do the same, especially when they find themselves in times of suffering. In the face of being locked in stocks in the inner prison, Paul and Silas prayed aloud and sang praise to God. We should yearn for the same response in our own lives. Bede, who lived in the late 600’s to early 700’s, commented:

The devotion of the apostles’ hearts and the power of prayer are expressed [here] together, since in the depths of the prison they sang hymns, and their praise moved the earth of the prison, shook the foundation, opened the doors, and finally loosened the very chains of those who had been bound.38

Once again, we see the combination of devotion and corporate prayer. As Bede commented, the two go together. We have seen this several times now in the book of Acts. Paul and Silas could have prayed silently by themselves; in fact, they may very well have done this as well. But here Luke is interested in again highlighting the aspect of praying together publicly, and showing God’s mighty response to such prayers. It is clear that Luke wants his readers to understand the importance and power of corporate prayer. In doing so in this passage, we

38Martin, 53.
also are shown that corporate prayer may involve only a few people; in this case two. So, corporate prayer doesn’t always involve the whole church. One can assume that the other believers in Philippi were praying together for Paul and Silas, and this was likely the case. But Luke chose to focus on the prayers of Paul and Silas in this passage.

Acts 20:36-38 (ESV)

36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 38 being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Paul had been traveling, and decided that he wanted to be Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost. To make it to Jerusalem in time, he decided he would sail past Ephesus and not stop to see the church there. His ship did land in Miletus, which is about forty miles south of Ephesus. While in Miletus, he sent word to the elders of the church in Ephesus to come see him. We aren’t told how long this took to get word to them and to have them travel down to Miletus, but we are told that the elders did in fact make the trip to visit with Paul. He spent time talking with them, and encouraged the elders to shepherd the flock God had placed in their charge. He also warned that there would be both people who came from outside the church and people from inside the church who would teach “twisted things”, drawing others away to themselves. It is then that Luke records the passage above. He wrote “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.” This text is the first of these Acts passages where we are told that there was kneeling involved with prayer. We don’t know if it is to be assumed that the people kneeled in the previous passages, or if Luke felt it was important to speak to that aspect of prayer. But here he does mentioned that Paul knelt, and probably the others as well. Luke also used words describing Paul as one who “prayed
with them. "He didn’t say that Paul prayed for them, but with them (Luke used the Greek preposition σὺν here). Luke may have wanted to communicate with this phrase that Paul and the elders all prayed together. We also see great emotion on the part of the elders and Paul, partly since Paul had told them they wouldn’t see him again. He had said that the Holy Spirit testified to him that there was both prison and suffering waiting for him in Jerusalem. In the midst of praying together, much emotion was displayed openly.

There are some things we can learn about God in this passage. First, the context makes clear that the Holy Spirit was guiding Paul in his travel to Jerusalem, for Paul knew he was to go and that persecution awaited him. We can also see the love that God had given Paul for the elders of the church at Ephesus, and the love He had given the elders for Paul. God calls His body to love one another, for that is His very character. The Godhead is a relationship of unity and love, and God desires His church to show the same qualities.

This leads us into what we can learn about ourselves in this passage. We are to love one another, and work and live together in unity. This passage of Paul praying with the elders is a good example of that very thing. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commented on this when they wrote:

Nothing can be more touching than these three concluding verses, leaving an indelible impression of rare ministerial fidelity and affection on the apostle’s part, and of warm admiration and attachment on the part of these Ephesian presbyters. Would to God that such scenes were more frequent in the Church!39

Not only are we to love one another, but we should not be ashamed to show it; we should not hold back our affection for each other. This passage shows it is neither ungodly nor unmanly to openly show affection to those in the church body.

There are aspects of corporate prayer we can learn from this passage as well. In commenting on this passage earlier, I mentioned that Luke pointed out that they were kneeling when they prayed. Calvin found this significant:

> The inward affection is indeed the chiefest thing in prayer; yet external signs, as kneeling, uncovering of the head, lifting up the hands, have a double use; the first is, that we exercise all our members to the glory and worship of God; secondly, that by this exercise our sluggishness may be awakened, as it were. There is also a third use in solemn and public prayer, because the children of God do by this means make profession of their godliness, and one of them doth provoke another unto the reverence of God.40

In Calvin’s mind, then, the act of kneeling while praying with one another can be very useful in our reverence and worship of God. We also see that Paul prayed with them. The implication here is that all of them prayed, not just Paul. Though Luke does not tell us this clearly, it is certainly implied in his wording. Here we have a picture of several men kneeling together, praying together, and showing affection to one another. Often times Christians today act as if prayer needs to be emotionless. But in this passage we see in corporate prayer both reverence (through kneeling) and emotion. Luke shows us the emotion of Paul and the elders after they pray, and we may safely assume there was emotion in their praying as well. Corporate prayer need not be boring, stiff, and void of emotion. Instead, it should be reverent, heart-felt, and emotional when appropriate.

**Acts 21:4-6 (ESV)**

> And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. 5 When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

40Calvin, vol.19, 265.
As in the previous passage, Paul is traveling to Jerusalem with the hope to arrive there by Pentecost. As the ship was sailing, it had to stop in the city of Tyre in order to drop off some cargo. Once they docked in Tyre, Paul and those with him sought out the disciples who were there in the city. Finding them, they stayed with these disciples for a week. Though we aren’t told what they talked about, it is probable that Paul shared many of the same things with the believers in Tyre that he did with the elders of Ephesus. There he encouraged them, and warned them of false teachers who would arise. We can assume Paul had the same message for these brothers and sisters in Tyre. As with the elders of Ephesus, Paul prayed together with them as he was getting ready to depart on the ship. Once again, Luke writes that the group knelt down as they prayed. This is the second time in as many passages that Luke finds it significant to mention that they all knelt as they prayed. And here again, the picture is of the whole group praying together. The word translated as “prayed” is in the form of an aorist participle in Greek (προσευξάμενοι), and could be translated as “we were praying”. This gives the idea that there was some time spent in prayer together, instead of just a short prayer given by one person. In this text we also see that it was not just the men of the church in Tyre who prayed with Paul, but the group included wives and children as well. Marshall comments on this event with these thoughts:

The mention of wives and children in an apparently pointless fashion indicates historical verisimilitude; in such a short time Paul and his companions had attained a high place in the affections of the families with whom they had been staying.41

Here we again have an indication of emotion and affection in the corporate prayer of the people. Though Luke doesn’t use the word “affection” here, it is indicated by the fact that whole families were there to pray and say their goodbyes. Additionally, we have picture of

41Marshall, 358.
whole families present in times of corporate prayer. Here it was more than just leaders of the church; entire families from the church were involved in praying together.

There is not much which is said about God in this text. He is mentioned in the sentence “And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” One can see here that God the Spirit was communicating with the people of Tyre. Apparently He was indicating to them that Paul had suffering and persecuting waiting for him in Jerusalem, and because of this they encouraged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Commenting on this verse, Polhill wrote:

Paul was absolutely convinced that God was leading him to the city. On the other hand, the warnings along the way prepared Paul for the imprisonment and hardship that did indeed befall him there, fortified him for the experience, and convinced him that God was in it all.\(^\text{42}\)

So not only did God communicate with the church at Tyre regarding Paul’s future, but He communicated to Paul through them as well. One can see here that often times God will communicate to us through others, as He did to Paul through other believers. God was indeed in control of what was to happen to Paul, and Paul was confident in God’s leading.

Regarding ourselves, we can learn that we should follow the example of Paul in following and obeying God regardless of the outcome. Paul knew he was headed toward suffering, yet did not hesitate to follow God into this situation. Additionally, we have in this passage another good example of love and affection for one another. Whole families came out to pray with Paul and see him off at the ship, knowing that they may not ever see him again. We should not be afraid to show our affection for one another as we pray together. We should also keep intimate in our relationship with God so that we can hear His voice, as did the church in Tyre. They heard from God that there would be hardship awaiting Paul, and

\(^{42}\)Polhill, 433.
due to their love for him they encouraged him to avoid Jerusalem. We need also to share with others what we are hearing and learning from the Lord.

In relation to corporate prayer, once again we have an example of kneeling while in prayer. It is no coincidence that Luke informs of this practice in two successive passages relating to corporate prayer. Proper reverence for God is sometimes shown rightly in a physical position of humility while praying. In addition, Luke brings in the view of whole families praying together. This is an important aspect of corporate prayer in the church; praying together is not just for the men, nor just for the adults. Everyone in families and in the church should be involved in corporate prayer.
In this paper, we have concentrated on what the book of Acts has to teach about corporate prayer. However, there are many more references in the New Testament to corporate prayer. In this section, we will look at only a few in order to get a sense of the nature of praying together. In many of the references to prayer in the New Testament, commands and admonitions are often given in the “plural”. In Greek, as in English, a plural noun or verb can be used when speaking to mean “each one of you all”. However, unlike English, Greek has definite words for the singular use of “you” as opposed to the plural of “you”. In the verses that will be considered next, all use the plural form of “you” as the speaker is referring to prayer. Most of the time in the New Testament when the plural form of “you” is used, it is addressing the corporate nature of those to which it is written, and not the idea of “each one of you”.

In his letter to the church at Colossae, the apostle Paul wrote “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” (Colossians 4:2 ESV). In this verse, the phrase “continue steadfastly” is actually one word in Greek. The word προσκαρτερέω, and is the same root word which we saw in Acts 1 and Acts 2 which was translated as “devoting” themselves to prayer. Though translated here at “continue steadfastly,” it means to be devoted to the act of prayer. Additionally, the form of the word used here in Colossians is a “second person plural imperative.” This means it is a command given to a group of people. Paul was essentially saying to the church, “You all are to be devoted to prayer,”
referring to the corporate nature of the church. So again we see the idea of devotion to corporate prayer, and this time with the encouragement to enter into it with an attitude of thanksgiving. Paul was clearly and directly telling the church as a whole to be continually devoted to prayer with an attitude of thanksgiving to God. Paul understood the importance of the corporate nature of prayer, hence exhorted the church at Colossae along these lines.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul wrote “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” (Romans 12:12 ESV). Once again, Paul uses the same Greek word (προσκαρτεροντες) we saw above in his letter to the Colossians. In this verse, the word is translated as “be constant,” but is the same root word which was translated in Acts as “devoted.” Here, the word is a “second person plural participle” which could be translated as “all of you being constant in prayer.” Once again, we can see the corporate implication of prayer, with the encouragement to be devoted to the practice of such.

In his letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul wrote “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17 ESV). Paul used a different Greek word here to mean “without ceasing” than the word used in the previous two verses. Instead of encouraging them to “be devoted,” Paul is saying “don’t stop” praying. The word translated “pray” is again in the form of a “second person plural imperative.” In other words, Paul commanded, “You all are to pray without stopping,” referring to both the constant and corporate nature of prayer in the church in Thessalonica. Over and over Paul commanded, exhorted, and encouraged the churches to be praying. The overall implication is that the churches were to pray corporately, in addition to being individuals who have times of prayer.

In his letters to believers, James looked at a negative aspect of prayer, specifically at why the people were not seeing their prayers answered. He wrote, “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on
yourpassions.” (James 4:2b-3). Though James does not use the word “pray” in this passage, it is evident that he is referring to prayer when he talks about “asking”. In saying they have not asked, and that they have asked with the wrong motives, James uses the “second person plural” wording, again referring to many people, not the individual. Could James be using this wording to mean “each one of you?” It is possible, but with the corporate nature of prayer that is seen in the letters to churches, it seems more likely that James is referring to the group of believers versus individuals. Yes, individuals are to pray with the right motives. But the groups of believers are to be praying with the right motives as well.

Lastly, we will consider the Lord’s Prayer recorded in Matthew 6. In verse 5, Jesus said “When you pray”; in verse 6 “But when you pray”; in verse 7 “When you pray”; in verse 9 “Pray then like this”. In every instance, the “you” Jesus used was in the plural form. When instructing the disciples in prayer, Jesus says “Our Father”; “Give us this day our daily bread”; “Forgive us our debts”; “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” All of these are used in the plural sense. Osborne comments on this passage by saying: “In short, this provides the basis for personal and corporate prayer…as well as a guide for the daily decisions of every Christian.”

Is the Lord’s Prayer to be used individually? Yes! However, there is certainly a corporate aspect to the prayer as well. Jesus was an example of personal prayer, but He was an example of corporate prayer as well. In teaching with disciples how to pray in Matthew 6, He is obviously implying the corporate aspect as well as the personal aspect of prayer. In the appendix of his book And the Place was Shaken, John Franklin looks at all the passages in the gospels where Jesus talked about or taught on prayer. He counted the verses in which Jesus used the singular form of “you” as He taught, and looked at the

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verses where Jesus used the plural form of “you”. Here are his findings: 4 verses where Jesus used the singular form while talking about prayer; 36 verses where Jesus used the plural form.
CHAPTER 6

APPLICATION

There are two broad areas of corporate prayer which will be addressed here. One is corporate prayer during the worship service, and the other is corporate prayer at times other than the main gathering for worship. Praying together was evident in both of these environments in the New Testament church, and should be characteristic of churches today.

Corporate Prayer during Worship Services

Most American churches have some sort of public prayer included in their worship services, even if it is just a prayer by the pastor at the conclusion of the service. Though we don’t have a clear picture of what worship services were like in the early church, we do have a good idea of what elements were involved in corporate gatherings of worship. As we have seen, worship in the Temple and in the first century synagogues included reading of the Word of God, commentary on that reading, and prayer (sacrifices were included in the Temple as well, but this is outside of our discussion). In the early church, the same elements were included. There is some indication that the Lord’s Supper may have been included in the worship services, but some believe this was celebrated at a time other than the worship service in the early church. As centuries passed, it is clear that the church celebrated the Lord’s Supper as an integral part of its worship services.
If corporate prayer is an important practice in the Christian church, it makes sense to utilize the one day per week that the church as a whole comes together in praying together. Sunday worship services are typically the time of the largest gathering of a local church. We have already seen that corporate prayer was a central part of the early church, and was certainly an element in their worship services. The American church needs to follow this example, and allow for appropriate times of prayer in its worship services. There are many churches which do this well, but the majority of churches in America do not seem to take this seriously. They may give a “nod” to prayer during the offering or at the end of the service, but do not make much effort to engage the congregation in praying. In our churches, we all too often “schedule in” a time of prayer in the worship service because we know we should. Instead, if we follow the example of the early church, praying together in worship should be one of the focal points of the worship service. In the church at which I serve, there is perhaps more prayer time built into the worship service than most churches with which I am familiar. With that said, we still need to do a much better job of engaging the congregation in the times of prayer. Too often the prayer times become “rote”, and the minds of the people in the congregation may wander instead of concentrating on the prayers offered and praying along silently with the one praying. In our church, we have a group of people who meet together to pray before the worship service. The idea is to pray for God to be honored in the service, to pray for those leading the congregation in worship to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to have clear minds, to pray for anyone there in the service who may not know Christ, to pray for the Word of God to be taught with clarity, and to pray for God to speak to us. We open the service with an elder praying aloud from the pulpit, and after singing we have a time of prayer for the offering, for one of our missionaries, and for the partnership of international churches in which we are a part. The teaching pastor prays as he begins the sermon, and we
pray briefly at the end of the service. This may sound like a lot of prayer in the worship service, but I am not convinced that we are as effective in our prayer times as we ought to be. Those in leadership in our congregation (which includes me) need to teach, shepherd, and be an example of commitment to corporate prayer. We need to take the prayer times seriously, and we need to constantly encourage our people to be praying along with us as we lead in prayer. Far too often those times of prayer in the worship service become tasks that we need to do before we move on to other aspects of worship. In talking about prayer meetings, Franklin states “No one can be allowed to be a spectator.”¹ I believe this applies to the times of prayer in corporate worship. Even though the people in the congregation may not be asked to pray aloud, we still cannot be satisfied with allowing them to just be spectators. Everyone in the congregation needs to be active in praying along in silence, and not be mentally “checked out”. So, what can American churches do in order to engage in corporate prayer during their worship services? First, as stated above, leaders of the church should teach, explain, exhort, encourage, and model corporate prayer to the congregation. They need to teach clearly on the nature and attributes of God, and then how we are to respond to and approach Him based on His character. Charles Spurgeon wrote:

True prayer is an approach of the soul by the Spirit of God to the throne of God . . . true prayer is a spiritual business from beginning to end, and its aim and object end not with man but reach to God Himself.²

Next, they need to build in as many times of prayer into the worship service as is appropriate. The ones leading the prayer should be prepared, and the congregation should be reminded to pray along with the one leading the prayer. As in every aspect of the worship service, the people in the congregation should be encouraged to be filled with the Holy Spirit,

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¹ John Franklin, And the Place Was Shaken (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman& Holman, 2005).

and to enter the prayer time with an attitude of worship, thanksgiving, humility, and expectancy.

Another aspect of corporate prayer is during the observance and celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Most churches have a time of both private and public prayer during the Lord’s Supper, and this is an appropriate time for both. As opposed to the Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, who viewed the Lord’s Supper as merely “symbolic” in remembering Christ’s death and resurrection, Calvin believed there was more to the Lord’s Supper than symbolism. He taught that Christ was present in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in a special way, and though His presence was not found in the bread and the wine, He is present in the observance nonetheless. With that view in mind, the Lord’s Supper is a great time for the church body to spend time in prayer together. The person leading the Lord’s Supper can use this time to pray aloud and direct the prayers of those participating in the observance. While most churches tend to promote prayer time during the Lord’s Supper as an individual and private time for those in the congregation, it can and should be used as a time of corporate prayer as well. Many churches in America do this well. However, the question arises, “How often should the church in America observe the Lord’s Supper?” A quick search of the web will show that opinions on this are quite varied. Some say the Lord’s Supper should be done weekly; others say twice per month; some say once a month. Though this question of “how often” is beyond the scope of this paper, one idea in incorporating more united prayer in the worship service is to consider observing the Lord’s Supper more often if it is not currently done weekly.

Another question about corporate prayer in the worship service is whether a church should utilize a prayer time like the one mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Author James Banks talked of visiting a church which had a time in their worship service where people turned to each other and prayed with (and for) one another. This is certainly an option,
though it doesn’t fit the example and pattern we see in the early church. The early church, and churches throughout history, seemed to opt for the corporate prayer times in worship services to be done in the manner of someone praying aloud, with the congregation praying silently. I believe this is the more biblical model, and I recommend that American churches follow that example during their worship services. Listen to what Irenaeus, a Christian leader in the second century, wrote about prayer in worship:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.  

I also have seen some other options of corporate prayer on Sunday mornings, though not done during the worship service itself. As mentioned earlier, our church has a time of corporate prayer before the worship service. Admittedly, this time is not well attended. However, the idea of having the people of the congregation come before the Sunday service is a sound one. Though this is not prayer during worship, it is another opportunity to engage a church in praying together on the day of worship. Since the people will be at the church for worship, they might be encouraged to come earlier to spend time seeking God together. It is a great way to prepare for worship! In the same vein, people can be encouraged to remain after the worship service to spend time in prayer together. Whether it is done before or after the service, a church could decide to begin with doing this once a month, and then see if they can make it happen more often. Churches which have multiple worship services, or Sunday

School before or after a worship service, may run into logistical issues with this idea. But I present it as another idea with which to promote and engage in corporate prayer on Sunday morning.

**Corporate Prayer at Times Other than Worship Services**

Most, if not all, of the examples of corporate prayer we saw in the book of Acts took place at times other than their regular worship service. The picture that Luke paints is one in which the church met at times during the week to pray for specific issues, or at times just to seek God. The church seemed to be quick to pray, and entered into seeking the Lord corporately on a consistent basis. We don’t have the idea that the early church necessarily met at appointed times for prayer, though this could have been the case. Luke did reveal that Peter and John went to the Temple at the appointed time of prayer, and it may have been that the people in the early church went to the Temple or synagogue for regular, scheduled times of prayer. If they had appointed times of prayer together as a church outside of the worship service, we have not been told about it in Acts.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the Asian churches with which I am familiar have appointed daily times of corporate prayer. While we don’t know if this was true of the early church, we do know that the early church (as described in Acts) had a commitment to praying together. The practice of praying together daily is one which would do the American church much good to adopt. But in the vein of “learning to walk before running”, it would be exciting to see American churches at least meet weekly to pray together. In past generations in the US, many churches held “Wednesday night prayer meetings.” I do not observe this happening much in American churches anymore, and many of the corporate midweek prayer times I have attended in churches have been geared more toward preaching to the congregation than actually praying together. What I propose is a
regular, appointed time of corporate prayer for churches, where the leaders of the church shepherd the people of the congregation in times of praying together. These should not be meetings for a pastor or an elder to preach a sermon; it should not be a time when the people get together to hear announcement or news; it should not be a time in which the majority of the time is spent in talking about prayer requests and little time actually spent in prayer. The prayer times should be gathering with one purpose: to seek the living God whole-heartedly. Can people do this individually? Yes, they can and they should. But this is a time for the body as a whole to come together for an expressed purpose. John Piper addressed this in a sermon to his congregation. He said:

Why should we pray publicly and corporately and not just privately? Why does Paul not simply pray for himself instead of soliciting the prayers of so many others on his behalf? Why might God be more inclined to answer the prayers of many than the prayers of one? According to our text, the thing that is different when many prayers are ascending is that the stage is being set for lots and lots of thanks to God for the answer to these prayers. The more people there are earnestly praying for some blessing of God, the more thanksgiving will ascend when the blessing comes. Paul's argument is very simply, “You must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks when the prayers of many are answered.”

If the church desires to see God bless His people greatly, it must approach Him together.

We saw in the passages from Acts a few examples of several in the church praying together, rather than the whole church getting together to pray. It is a good thing for smaller groups of people within a church to be praying together, and we should certainly encourage this in our churches in America. We saw Peter and John going to the Temple to pray; we saw Paul praying with the elders from the church at Ephesus; we saw Paul praying with the disciples and their families in Tyre. Many American churches utilize “small groups” to help build community, to teach, and to encourage the people in their congregations. One of the

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aspects of small groups is that they normally spend time praying together. In some churches, ministry teams spend time in prayer together. In others, Sunday School classes pray together. And, of course, families should be praying together regularly. The practice of praying in smaller groups like this is good, and church leaders should promote these opportunities for prayer. However, these times of smaller group prayer should not take the place of the church body meeting regularly to approach and seek God. While some churches communicate things to pray to the smaller groups, it still does not allow for the dynamic of the church at large to pray together. Because a large portion (probably majority) of American churches do not meet weekly for corporate prayer, it might be helpful for churches to begin to meet once a month or so until they can get the people in their congregations in the habit of praying together. A monthly prayer time would be a huge improvement for most churches in the US, and can be the impetus for more regular and consistent times of corporate prayer. Hence, I recommend that for churches which have no time of corporate prayer, that they begin meeting monthly for this purpose, and then plan to meet more often as they learn to pray together. Monthly prayer times can become twice a month, and then that can become weekly.

Obstacles to Corporate Prayer

Many authors and speakers have talked about obstacles to prayer. For example, D.A Carson lists these obstacles or excuses in the hearts of God’s people. According to Carson, they are: I am too busy to pray; I feel too spiritually dry to pray; I feel no need to pray; I am too bitter to pray; I am too ashamed to pray; I am content with mediocrity. E.M. Bounds wrote this about obstacles to prayer:

Spiritual work is taxing work, and men are loath to do it. Praying, true praying, costs an outlay of serious attention and of time, which flesh and blood do not relish. Few

5 D.A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2008), 111-122.
persons are made of such strong fiber that they will make a costly outlay when surface work will pass as well in the market.\textsuperscript{6}

While I agree with these men, I am convinced that the main obstacle the American church faces regarding corporate prayer is a poor view of God on the part of the church. Once the church understands Who God is, what He desires of His people, and how He desires to bless His people, churches will be motivated to come together to seek the Sovereign God on a continual basis. And this task of helping the church come to a clear, biblical view of God falls squarely upon the shoulders of the leaders (pastors and elders) of a church. Bounds said it well with:

Where are the Christly leaders who can teach the modern saints how to pray and put them at it? Do we know we are raising up a prayerless set of saints? Where are the apostolic leaders who can put God’s people to praying? Let them come to the front and do the work, and it will be the greatest work which can be done.\textsuperscript{7}

As I began working on this paper, I expected I would come to a point of application in spelling out a certain methodology on how to do corporate prayer. But after studying the passages in Acts, I have concluded that the logistics of corporate prayer are not the issue. If a church desires to pray, they will work around any logistical roadblocks they may encounter. The real issue is the “heart” of the church, and in particular the “heart” of the leaders in a church. In looking at the early church, Luke focused more on \textit{attitude} than he did on logistics. He told his readers over and over of the \textit{devotion} to praying together the early church displayed. He talked about the \textit{constancy} and \textit{intensity} to prayer they possessed. He talked about the \textit{emotion} with which they prayed, and he showed the \textit{humility} they expressed in the kneeling as they prayed together. The problem with corporate prayer in the American church is not logistics; it is a low view of God and the resulting heart issues. The solution to

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  \item \textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 81.
\end{itemize}
this problem lies in the hands of the church leaders, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. If we want churches in America to embrace corporate prayer, the church leaders will have to teach accurately on the subject. They will need to encourage and exhort the people in their congregations to participate in corporate prayer. They will need to model a devotion to praying together. And they will have to become and remain consistent in corporate prayer. If this happens, the American church will see greater blessing from God. If the church in America continues without much corporate prayer, it will continue to miss out on the things God desires to do in and through her. Is corporate prayer the “end all” in seeing God honored and glorified? No it is not. However, it is one important piece which is either missing or sorely lacking in the current American church. The church in the US needs to follow the examples of the early church as presented by Luke in the book of Acts, and to follow the example of the current churches in Asia with which I have had much experience. May the church in America overcome the heart issues which seem to plague the people of God, and may it begin again to seek God together with devotion, humility, and consistency.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have looked at the corporate nature of prayer in the Temple and in the synagogues of the first century Jews, since that was the background out of which the earliest Christians came. In these times of public and corporate worship, prayer was an important aspect. The times of corporate prayer were mostly those of a person (priest in the Temple, or leader in the synagogue) praying aloud while the congregation prayed along silently. At appropriate times, the congregation would give some words of affirmation, such as “Amen.” Though it seems prayer in the worship times of the Temple and synagogues was usually uttered by an individual for the whole congregation, it was nonetheless an integral part of the worship. Osborne writes “So corporate prayer was at the heart of synagogue worship.” If corporate prayer was at the heart of synagogue worship, it would have also been at the heart of early Christian worship services. Since the church had this example of worship, they would have conducted prayer in much the same way. As we saw in Acts 2:46, the early church continued to attend the Temple together. It is likely then that with this example of corporate prayer, one person would lead a particular time of prayer during worship with the congregation praying silently and then uttering an affirmation at the appropriate time. In looking at specific passages in the book of Acts which dealt in some way
with corporate prayer, it was seen that most of the examples of the church praying together were at times other than a public worship setting. Most of those recorded were either separate prayer meetings held at times other than the worship service, or times of prayer which arose without planning.

With corporate prayer being indispensable to the early church as recorded in Acts, there are also specific aspects of prayer that were seen. The most often learned about attribute of corporate prayer is the idea of being “devoted” to the practice. Over and over, wording such as “being devoted” was used to describe the attitude toward approaching God together. The early church in Acts was committed to praying together regularly and consistently. They understood their dependence on the Sovereign God, and sought Him together constantly. And as author John Franklin proposed, the apostles saw corporate prayer as one of the two foundational ministries of the church. Not only was the early church consistent in their prayers together, they were often specific in the things for which they prayed. We saw that they prayed for wisdom and guidance in naming another apostle; they prayed for boldness in speaking the word; they prayed for Peter while he was in prison, they prayed for Paul and Barnabas as they set them apart for God’s special calling; they prayed for Paul as he was headed for suffering in Jerusalem. We also saw that when the church prayed together, they prayed with confidence and trust in the living God. They prayed intensely, and were shown to have incorporated fasting into their prayer at times. This early church was a praying church, people who committed together to seek God. How different is this from what we see in American churches today? D.A. Carson lamented this when he wrote:

Most pastors testify to the decline in personal, family, and corporate prayer across the nation. Even the recently organized “concerts of prayer” are fairly discouraging from an historical perspective: some of them, at least, are so blatantly manipulative that they are light-years away from the prayer meetings held in parts of the world that have tasted a breath of heaven-sent revival. Moreover, it is far from clear that they are
changing the prayer habits of our churches, or the private discipline of significant numbers of believers.\textsuperscript{1}

At the very core of the nature of prayer is the character and nature of God. In looking at the Acts passages on corporate prayer, there were aspects of God which could be learned. We saw that God delights in the prayers of His people; that He knows the hearts of His people; that He desires to make His will known to His people. We learned that God is the One who causes the growth in the church, that He is the One who brings people to Himself; that God responds to the prayers of His people; that He is Sovereign over all. We saw that God is faithful, and that He fulfills His word; that He calls people into ministry, and He is the One who has authority over the church and its elders. He listens to the prayers of His people, and does not abandon them in their times of need. He guides us and communicates with us through His Holy Spirit. In short, we are shown in Acts that God is an Awesome, Sovereign God who cares for His people. It was with this understanding of God that the early church was eager to and devoted to approaching and seeking Him corporately. One must wonder if American churches would exhibit the same commitment to prayer if they understood God in view of these attributes.

The American church is in a sad state of affairs when it comes to corporate prayer. It must repent of its low view of God, and therefore its low view of prayer. It can and must turn to seeking Him with devotion, with intensity, with fasting, with confidence. Is it possible for the American church to become known as a “praying church” like the example of the church in Acts? I believe so!

\textsuperscript{1}D.A. Carson, \textit{A Call to Spiritual Reformation} (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2008).
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