

Standin' in the Need of Prayer

“Hey buddy, thanks for sharing your story with me...it means a lot. Do you mind if I pray for you right now?”; “Girl, it is good to see you again. Tell me, what is the Lord doing in your life?”; “Pastor, thanks for being an incredible inspiration and a blessing to this church...if there’s anything you want me to pray about for you, let me know.”

Typical Starbucks conversation openers, right? Maybe in some remote deserts of the world, where no eavesdroppers lurk, hearing these embarrassing topics. Being part of the body of believers in the Church of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, doesn't require me bringing it up in conversation. Does it? Well, maybe sometimes. Perhaps after a car accident and one comes out alive, with a scratch here or there...sure, enter God. *“It could have been much worse; the Lord had his angels around that car.”* Maybe on Sundays too. *“Good sermon, eh? Pastor made some good points. Praise God for him.”* Good times to talk about Jehovah, to praise him for his goodness, but do these situational conversations reflect the innate desires of the gospel in our hearts? Are we, as believers, proclaiming His story in every area of our lives, every day of our lives? Or, are we living a “stained glass masquerade,” feigning a life of vibrancy while the elements of life corrode our colored panes of faith? As pastors, are you encouraging your flock to open up to each other, to *“bear one another’s burdens?”*¹ As believers and as shepherds in the body of Christ, we must understand our purpose and step up to the uncomfortable and disquieting challenge of unity, learning to pray for and with each other. We need practical instruction from our pastors, and we need a faith that binds us in more than just a name.

To practice unity, we must first understand it. What does unity actually mean? We turn to the basics, the good ol' dictionary. *“Unity: Singleness or constancy of purpose or action; continuity: ‘In an army you need unity of purpose’ (Emmeline Pankhurst).”*² Of the seven descriptions of unity in the dictionary, this one seems most applicable for the church. *Singleness of purpose.* The good Father sent his beloved Son to this earth for a purpose—to pay the price of corruption and buy the lives of his chosen ones. He then left his Spirit with the chosen, and gave them a purpose as well. *“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”*³ The purpose he left to his disciples is our purpose today. With one heart and one desire, we must seek out the hurt, the lost, the poor, the fatherless, and bring them the word of the Lord. Singleness of purpose.

“In an army you need unity of purpose.” Soldiers accomplish little on their own. One man cannot siege, ambush or attack the enemy's stronghold. Without his comrades, the warrior's purpose is vain. An apt description of the Lord's army is provided

through lyrics of a song by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir from Brooklyn, New York. It says this: “*We are united in Jesus Christ; we are the soldiers of the light. We don’t wrestle flesh and blood, but principalities of the dark. We too are marching to one beat, crushing the enemies under our feet. We are mighty in our stand, with God’s Word in our hands.*”⁴ Together we fight the enemies of the darkness. Together we march to the beat of the Lord’s drum. We are the Lord’s army, and the desire of the Commander-in-Chief is our desire. His wish is our command.

So, the Lord commands, we obey. Game over, right? Not quite. We need a strategy. This army needs a boot camp. We need to go through some obstacle courses together, and see some sweat, struggles, and blood. We need to slap each other on the back, give some thumbs up, and help carry packs up the hills, because *those that sweat together bond together*.

In the realm of Christian believers, spiritual sweating is lacking. We come together to play cards, sing around bonfires, compete in church leagues...activities profitable for social growth. But too often we isolate these activities, and claim these as our tools for “Christian fellowship.” We put on the fancy apparel of piety for people to see us in, and shove our tattered, dirty rags of guilt and shame to the back closet. We cover up our pain, saving our tears for the refuge of the pillow, surrendering our sorrows to the Lord of the night.

“*My brethren, these things ought not to be so.*” Jesus himself retained a small group of friends to himself, friends that would be there for him when the going got tough. He told the twelve disciples things that he didn’t tell everyone. He shared with them his hopes, his concerns, his purpose. “*From this time forth began Jesus to shew forth unto his disciples, how he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and be raised again the third day.*”⁵ Jesus even asked the disciples to pray for his work: “*The harvest indeed is plenteous, but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.*”⁶ If the Prince of Peace can ask mere mortals to pray for his ministry, how much more should we sinners be imploring each other for prayers? As it’s said, “*The family that prays together stays together.*”

Staying together in the family of faith requires instructive leadership. We are blessed with ministers in our midst who are faithful to the preaching and exhorting of Scriptures. Week in and week out, they provide doctrinal truths for our spiritual nourishment. Too often, however, lack of practical application resounds as a common criticism of Protestant Reformed churches. As members slander and gossip about each other, and as teenagers ostracize their peers, spiritual growth decays and the fruit of the Spirit rots away in the body of believers. So we seek answers, looking to the leaders.

Although the importance of personal conviction ought never be minimized, the character of any business is oft reflected in its management. As pastors, do you ever confess personal, real-life struggles with your sheep? Do you ask for prayers on your behalf, other than when considering calls from other churches? If a company boss never acknowledges errors or struggles, what message comes to the workers? No one accepts blame for mistakes and no one confides in each other. Gossip thrives and cliques divide.

The purpose here is not to stereotype every pastor or church member, but to emphasize the intent of our existence. Areas do exist where Satan is squelched, and the truth shines forth, but for the ecumenical population, a confession must be made: Gossip, slander, sexual abuse and promiscuity, idolatry, hypocrisy, resentment, racism, and every type of abominable sin that exists in the world, also abide within the walls of our theologically correct sanctuaries. Yes, while the Lord tarries, it is impossible to root out every sin in any church, but the call to stewardship still cries out to us. Jehovah-jireh, the One who sees over all things, calls out to the remnant to band together to combat evil. As Margaret Mead, a powerful female intellectual of the mid-1900s declared, *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”*⁷ We are those thoughtful committed citizens of the kingdom of the Lord; *we* are the people we have been waiting for to bring light into a dark world. But if we insist on constructing walls of division among ourselves, then we provide food for that roaring lion, who preys on our weak and bleeding flesh of discordance.

Breaking these dividing walls involves building new structures. With the foundation of Christ’s atonement, we unite, preparing a fortress of faith for Christ’s spiritual warriors. We begin on our knees. Prayer provides a healing balm to our wounded hearts. *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*⁸

As corporate believers, this is probably the hardest part of growing together. Sharing our social, marital, parental, spiritual and human inadequacies with each other opens us up to a world of pain and vulnerability. We are sharing potentially explosive information with each other, and entrusting the other not to light the fuse. And yet, this is exactly what the body of Christ is all about. Faith. It requires a step out of our comfort zone. *For when we step out of our comfort zone, we step into God’s.*

A huge part of this step of faith lies in the pastors’ arenas. *“All we like sheep have gone astray, and have turned every one to his own way.”*⁹ We need the shepherd’s staff to lead us back to green pastures of prayer. Within church settings, bible study sessions provide prime opportunities for united growth among believers. When the Bible discussion ends, the time following opens the door to community. Here, the

pastor can encourage believers to share stories of concern or praise, stimulating prayer requests and thanksgivings. Of course, with large groups, this can be a lengthy and drawn out process. A simple solution to that is encouraging saints to divide up into small groups and pray with each other. This provides an outlet from “stage fright” of large groups, and draws believers together, binding them in the love of the cross. At the end, the pastor can again bring the group together, and close the time in prayer. As individuals leave, the stories shared in those small groups remain, and gossip ceases, as the love of Christ reigns.

Simple changes like this can provide an open and honest environment within the church without leading to a “slippery slope” of liberalism in the Reformed dogma. But when we refuse any change, clinging obstinately and unbiblically to tradition, we err, and send searching hearts elsewhere. As a young adult in our churches, I find it easy to turn to other churches, and investigate their ministries. So often it seems that our denomination is stuck in a rut, like the lukewarm church of Laodicea, ready for spewing. I see other churches working in the community, reaching out to less fortunate, and incorporating the youth in church activities, while much of our ministry seems inwardly directed or nonexistent.

The common refute for this argument lies in the acknowledgment of doctrinal discrepancies of “those other churches,” and the need to preserve the covenant. Yet, I cannot help but wonder, when will we start engaging our members in unashamedly proclaiming the gospel? We often lack courage for this task because disunity exists among members. When we band together in pain and sorrow, we can begin to see the benefits of incorporating ideas like small group bible studies, ghetto visits, and prayer partners into our religious community, rather than writing it off as showbiz faith. As we do this, we begin to look more to the needs of others, and less to ourselves. This concept finds its Scriptural support in James’ reprimand to the saints of the Dispersion in chapter 1:27: “*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*”

To ignite this fire of the “*pure religion,*” one thing is certain: we must unite. Like the Hebrews of old who received the important message to cast off sin, and press on in faith, we too, feel the compulsion to obey. “*Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith....*”¹⁰ The call to us, the army of the Lord, comes loud and clear. Together, let us come in the name of Jesus, and proudly proclaim what the Lord has done in *our* lives. Let us band together in prayer, casting off our clothes of pious insincerity, and instead donning the robes of righteousness; robes knit for a community of love.

Endnotes

¹ Galatians 6:2

² *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*
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³ Mark 16:15

⁴ Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir Album, 1999: “*High and Lifted Up*”

⁵ Matthew 16:21

⁶ Matthew 9:37-38

⁷ http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret_Mead

⁸ James 5:16

⁹ Isaiah 53:6

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:1