

## Prayer, Movements & Belief - Part 1

The 'emerging church' and 'radical discipleship' movements have their roots in a profound dissatisfaction with establishment Christianity. In rejecting the establishment church, both traditions have tended to throw some babies out with the bathwater. One of these babies is prayer. As one deeply committed to radical discipleship and mission, I think it is imperative to examine what I perceive to be a lack of prayer among us, and what the consequences for our movements will be.

Part 1 of this short analysis will look at how our history has shaped our attitudes towards prayer and briefly outline some reasons why we don't pray. Part 2 will suggest consequences for our movements stemming from this lack of prayer and sketch the real issues that lie behind prayer.

### The Establishment Church & Prayer

In the establishment churches that nursed so many of us, prayer was a substitute for action. We prayed with pietistic fervour, but left the legwork to missionaries and activists. When we abandoned these churches, we rejected prayer and embraced activism - working for justice, doing mission in schools, living in community, planting churches. I occasionally prayed, but only when desperate. Prayer was left behind as part of the Egypt from which we were rapidly making our exodus.

When our activism had exhausted us, some of us (myself included) returned to prayer via the contemplative disciplines found in monastic orders. Silence, lectio divina, fasting, solitude and other practices became the tools by which we 'sustained the journey'. Prayer became the petrol to our still-speeding vehicle.

Despite our timid appropriation of contemplative disciplines, prayer doesn't get a big wrap in emerging church or radical discipleship circles. Assuming that we have moved beyond the mindless rejection of establishment church practices, why do we treat prayer as little better than food to be scoffed down in order to get on with the 'real work' of the reign of God?

### Why We Don't Pray

- ***"Prayer is good, but it's no substitute for action."***

We don't reckon prayer is *real* work. We treat prayer as a back-up to the practical, effective, grass-roots, strategic, sustainable, educational stuff that we're doing. It's definitely not equal to 'getting your hands dirty'. Think about how much effort we put into 'building the kingdom' compared to how little energy we give to prayer. This is ironic because the tradition from which we borrow our contemplative disciplines (monasticism) regards prayer as inseparable from work. Monks actually thought it *achieved* things!

- ***“It’s impossible to ask God to intervene in the world - that would be arrogant”.***

Because our culture conditions us against claiming to know what is good for others, we think that by asking God to intervene we are assuming that we *know* what God should do. This is a helpful corrective to paternalism. However, our activism in the cause of justice and mission is equally a way of claiming that *we know* what is good for others. Would you plant a church if you didn’t believe the reign of God required it? Would you buy fair-trade coffee if you thought God was opposed to it? *All* our actions in the cause of the kingdom implicitly assume that God agrees with us. However, our reluctance to pray for these things is a sign that our actions lack conviction - if we truly believed our activism was God’s work (and what other work is worth doing?) then we would pray about it constantly.

- ***“Perhaps prayer changes things, but I haven’t seen any results.”***

We don’t believe that God can, or wants to, intervene in the world at all. Ours is the ‘clockwork universe’, designed to work without involvement from God. The terrifying consequence of this belief is that we are solely responsible for building the kingdom of God. It is terrifying because we know, deep down and usually unconsciously, that we are incapable of shouldering this responsibility, let alone fulfilling it. Even if we do recognise this fundamental vulnerability, we do not *know* it, otherwise we would be screaming to God for help every day.

These reasons for not praying are widespread and probably recognisable in our own lives. They certainly are in mine! I believe these problems with prayer mask deeper issues that our movements will need to deal with in order to sustain a truly biblical witness. Part 2 of this article will look at what these issues are and how they affect our movements.

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