

“Bearing fruit and growing in *prayer* for the mission of Jesus”

The Acts 29 Southeast Region

Pastors and Wives Conference

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Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Colossians 4:2-4

Jani and I love you. We feel privileged to be here among you. Acts 29 is a movement of God in this generation, and it’s obvious. Let me explain the 50 years of perspective with which we perceive you and rejoice over you. We remember 1968, when Martin Luther King was assassinated in April, and Robert Kennedy was assassinated in June, and the Democratic National Convention went into meltdown in Chicago that August, so that Mayor Daley called in the National Guard to do battle with the protestors in the streets.

But even as our nation was in an agony of one self-injury after another, God was moving. It came to be called The Jesus Movement. It was imperfect. It was flawed. But we have a living memory of seeing the Holy Spirit change the subject on the streets of L.A. from drugs and revolution to Jesus and the gospel. Don’t tell me that can’t happen in your city. We have a living memory of many thousands in our generation who were far from God suddenly turning around and running toward Jesus. It was in the news.

Naturally, any church that was open to what God was doing grew like crazy. But as The Jesus Movement faded away in the 70s and the churches consolidated the gains, too many of us lost our way. We still wanted big growing churches, of course. But we tried to bottle that positive energy and package it and reproduce it, as if it were our own. As the 70s wore on into the 80s and 90s, we were growing churches – but not enough by divine power. We were growing churches by our own brilliant methods. We took the divine message for granted, and we emphasized our own methods. And it seemed to work. But the joy wasn’t the same.

Then, as the 1900s turned into the 2000s, in various ways, God began to bring us back. God began a work of renewal in the gospel. We began to rediscover the power of the message. The Lord led many of us into gospel renewal, all without any central planning or coordination or even awareness of what was going on here and there. But God was stirring us up. So Acts 29 began, The Gospel Coalition, Together For The Gospel, theological hip-hop and spoken word poetry, and so forth – these streams of gospel blessing began flowing into our generation. And here we are, fifty years after that horrible year, and 2018 is the new 1968. Once again our nation is divided and angry and utterly without answers. And once again God is moving in the power of the gospel, for his glory in a hard time. The cultural indicators are tanking, but the gospel indicators are surging, and you gospel monsters in Acts 29 are right in the thick of it. We are very

encouraged. We only wish we were 20 years younger, to see how this is going to play out.

Here is what you must do. You must steward the historic blessing God is giving. You must receive it, rejoice in it, and parlay it into more and more and more, and push your advantage as far as it will go. But how? What does it look like to steward the renewal God is sending down on us in these great days? What is the wise and powerful way to take full advantage of the amazing blessing of our times? It's simple. It has to be simple, if it's going to work for us. One, stay low. Stay low before the Lord. God is opposed to the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. We'll talk more about this in a moment. Two, stick together. Refuse to go on losing friends. Stop treating brothers and sisters as dispensable. When we will say to another, "You're in my life, and I'm in yours, no matter what"? Sticking together is how everyone will know we are his disciples (John 13:34-35). Three, advance the mission. Plant churches that plant churches that plant churches, so that the gospel goes viral and Jesus becomes the lead story on CNN, as he should be today. Stay low, stick together, plant churches. That is how you can steward powerfully the historic blessing God is giving in these great days.

I want to speak to you about that first step – staying low before the Lord in humility, in openness, in need, all coming to a focal point in prayer. So my topic this evening is "bearing fruit and growing in *prayer* for the mission of Jesus." Years ago Francis and Edith Schaeffer were rethinking their Christianity at a profound level. Here is a question they had to face:

"Edith, I wonder what would happen to most churches and Christian work if we awakened tomorrow, and everything concerning the reality and work of the Holy Spirit, and everything concerning prayer, were removed from the Bible. I don't mean just ignored, but actually cut out – disappeared. I wonder how much difference it would make?" We concluded it would not make much difference in many board meetings, committee meetings, decisions and activities.

And if that makes you as uncomfortable as it makes me, then these verses in Colossians 4 are a perfect way for us to conclude our gathering, as we look to the future and what we must do, including what we must change.

This call to prayer comes at the end of the teaching section of Paul's letter. From verse 7 on, it's family chitchat. But as he concludes the teaching, he points us upward, toward God, in verses 2-4, and then he points us outward, toward the world, in verses 5-6. I have no doubt we will go from this retreat with an outward focus. But will we match that with an upward focus? What are we in Acts 29 known for? We are known for our mission of theologically conscientious, global, diverse church planting. That is good. That's all embedded in verses 5-6. But verses 2-4 are also here. Prayer is not an add-on. Prayer is not a sidebar. Prayer is not an enhancement. Prayer is how we connect with God, just as much as mission is how we connect with the world. But prayer comes first. After all, how can we fulfill the mission of God without the power of God?

Moreover, since this concludes the teaching part of this letter, we know that prayer is where true doctrine takes us. If we are *not* continuing steadfastly in prayer, there is a reason. And that reason is, there is something true about God we do not believe, and there is something untrue about ourselves that we do believe. We do not believe God will make the difference in our mission, and we deeply believe it's up to us. That is false doctrine. But what if the Jesus of Colossians is real? What if there is a Jesus out there who created all things, is before all things and in him all things hold together? What if reality is designed so that in everything he will be preeminent? What if he alone has the power to make dead people come alive? What if he isn't screaming for your blood because he gave his own? What if even the devil is merely playing a role in his drama? And what if he has the power to break down any door and open it wide, for the gospel to gain new ground? If that the truth about Jesus, then let's believe it, and let's prove that we believe it by praying to him, as if everything depends on him, because it does.

So I want to do two things. One, open up the text just a bit. This is not how we typically think about prayer. So let's dig in. Two, explain why prayer is a brilliant way to steward God's blessing in your generation.

1. *The text*

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving”

Why does Paul put it that way? Because God wants us to pray, whether we feel like it or not. Prayer is *how* God cracks our hearts open to himself. He wants to draw us in, deeper than we've ever gone before, deeper than we've ever dreamed of going. So he says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer.” Whenever we quit and give up on prayer, we're always just five minutes away from a major breakthrough.

That verb – “to continue steadfastly” – was used in Classical Greek to mean “to persist obstinately in.” The New Testament uses this verb to describe what stood out in the early church. This verb is not about just doing something; it's about doing something *with holy determination that refuses to be denied*. What does the New Testament tell us about the early church? “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). And the whole point in that context, as you know, was they were choosing prayer and the ministry of the word over other legitimate concerns. They chose *not* to do other things, so that they *could* be devoted to prayer. And finally, “Be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12).

If we could wave our magic wand and instantly transform the Christian Church in America today to become steadfastly devoted to any priority we desire, would we choose prayer? God would. The early church did. What do we understand today better than they did?

Then Paul adds, “being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” Why is that there? Realism! If we continue steadfastly in prayer, it will test our capacity for commitment. We can become lethargic, discouraged, distracted. We start thinking, “This isn’t worth it.” In *The Shadow of the Broad Brim*, pages 223-224, the author tells us that a prayer meeting there at The Metropolitan Tabernacle that lacked energy and conviction and the prayers were faltering, until Spurgeon got up and insisted in prayer to God that they would not let the devil have that prayer meeting and that they would seek the Lord earnestly and not settle for less than God’s mighty blessing – and the prayer meeting finally took off! Spurgeon was watchful and alert and awake and would not take No for an answer. And “with thanksgiving” slips in there at the end, because thanking the Lord creates the encouragement and good cheer and confidence of all prayer, because we’re praying to One who obviously is very willing to bless and give. Just look around. He has already done so much.

That’s what the verse is saying about prayer. Here is why that matters so much as a strategy for stewarding our historic blessing.

2. *Why this is a brilliant way to steward the blessing*

To continue steadfastly in prayer is to do the Lord’s work in the Lord’s way. Christianity is not accepting Jesus on terms of grace, and then we go do things for him by our own virtue and strength. But real Christianity is our need being filled with his grace moment by moment. That is doing the Lord’s work in the Lord’s way. And that is how we steward the blessing. We carry it forward the very same way we received it in the first place – our total need lifted up to his endless grace moment by moment.

We have an opportunity in 2018 that God’s people in this country haven’t had in a long time. We have an opportunity to ride a wave of divine blessing we haven’t seen in a generation. If we will be wise and diligent in prayer, we can truly live up to our name as Acts 29 and keep on telling the story of the early church in this generation and the next. Here is what God did back then – and I take this from Albert Barnes’ commentary on the book of Acts:

This book [of Acts] contains unanswerable evidence of the truth of the Christian religion. Within the space of *thirty years* after the death of Christ, the gospel had been carried to all parts of the civilized, and to no small portion of the uncivilized, world. Its progress and its triumphs were not concealed. It had been preached in the most splendid, powerful, and corrupt cities; churches were already founded in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and at Rome. The gospel had spread in Arabia, Asia Minor, Greece, Macedon, Italy, and Africa. It had assailed the most mighty existing institutions; it had made its way over the most formidable barriers; it had encountered the most deadly opposition; it had traveled to the capital city of Rome and had secured such a hold even in the imperial city as to make it certain that it would finally overturn the established religion and seat itself upon the ruins of paganism. Within thirty years, it had settled the point that it would overturn every bloody altar, close every pagan temple, bring under its

influence the men of office, rank, and power, and that ‘the banners of the faith would soon stream from the palaces of the Caesars.’ All this would be accomplished by the instrumentality of Jews – of fishermen – of Nazarenes. They had neither wealth, armies, nor allies. With the exception of Paul, they were men without learning. They were taught only by the Holy Spirit, armed only with the power of God, victorious only because Christ was their Captain, and the world acknowledged the presence of the messengers of the Highest and the power of the Christian religion. Its success never has been, and never can be, accounted for by any other supposition than that God attended it.

But sadly, that is not the only kind of Christianity being offered in our world today. There is also a kind of Christianity that is the devil’s masterpiece of iniquity. It is biblical in theology, but worldly in power. It has the appearance of godliness – it really does look good – but it denies the power of God (2 Timothy 3:5). And the Bible says, “Avoid such people.” Even God avoids them.

Here is a statement by Francis Schaeffer, it’s one of the most important things I’ve ever read, and it’s never far from my mind:

The central problem of our age is not liberalism or modernism, nor the old Roman Catholicism or the new Roman Catholicism, nor the threat of communism, nor even the threat of rationalism and the monolithic consensus which surrounds us [nor, I would add today, postmodernism or materialistic consumerism or visceral sensualism or whatever]. All these are dangerous but not the primary threat. The real problem is this: the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, individually or corporately, tending to do the Lord’s work in the power of the flesh rather than of the Spirit. The central problem is always in the midst of the people of God, not in the circumstances surrounding them.

There is a reason God calls us to continue steadfastly in prayer. Prayer is weakness. Prayer is mystery. Prayer takes time from practical, measurable things. But God calls us to continue steadfastly, ruggedly, obstinately in prayer, because it is how *God’s* power comes down right into the center of our actual need. Nothing is more relevant.

But do we believe that? Do our churches believe that? Call for a prayer meeting, and not many people show up. We all deeply feel that, if anything is going to get *done*, it will be thanks to our ideas and our organizing and our promoting and our packaging and all the other things we really are good at. And prayer? We’re all for it! Prayer is a *wonderful* added ingredient. Isn’t that how we think? But that whole approach could cost us our historic opportunity. Yes, let’s ask God to bless what we do; but let’s not fail to ask him that we would be swept away into what only he can do. That’s what happened in the book of Acts, chapters 1-28. How about chapter 29? Is it okay with us if we never actually figure out how God works and ten years from now we still feel like it’s a continual adjustment and endless discovery? Do we mind being visited by God, so that

he takes the work in his own hands? Do we mind being dealt with by God, so that we are humbled and he alone is exalted?

We might think we'd have to decide between only two categories: doing the Lord's work versus doing the devil's work. But we always face a decision between not two but three categories:

1. Doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way
2. Doing the Lord's work in our own way
3. Doing the devil's work.

Here is what we must understand. The great divide is not between 2 and 3 – doing the Lord's work in our own way versus doing the devil's work. The great divide is between 1 and 2 – doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way versus doing the Lord's work in our own way.

Again, we might think that the difference between the Lord's work in the Lord's way and the Lord's work in our own way is only a matter of degree and emphasis and nuance. We might think that the Lord's work in the Lord's way is an upgrade on the Lord's work in our own way. But it is not a difference of degree. It is a difference of *kind*. Doing the Lord's work in our own way is not, say, 6 on a scale of 1 to 10, while doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way is an 8 or 9, or even a 10 on a good day. No, doing the Lord's work in our own way is betrayal. It's a stab in his back. It's using the Lord to advance our own big-deal-ness. And if we then succeed, that is not a 6. That is not even a 1. That is evil. Doing the Lord's work in our own way and doing the devil's work are basically the same.

Therefore, is there any higher priority in your church than to stop and pray and study and consider long enough to figure out what it looks like for your church to become a movement of prayer, continuing steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving, so that our moment doesn't pass us by but we go into warp speed over the next five years? Many important matters press upon you. But what is *more* important than that?

The South does not need more successful churches making an impact by doing whatever trendy antics will attract more attention to themselves. A church with the wrong *kind* of attractive power, however compelling it might be, with thousands of people flocking in – any church succeeding by the power of the flesh is a total disaster brilliantly disguised as a massive success. If I had to choose – and inevitably every one of us does have to choose – if I had to choose, I'd rather fail in the power of the Holy Spirit than succeed in the power of the flesh. Why? Because even a failure in the power of the Spirit will still play some strategic role in the great battle being fought in the heavenlies in our generation. But a church making it big, by the tricks of the trade, plays into the dishonoring of Christ in our time, just as much as an adult book store, and maybe more so.

Do you remember? When Peter tried to persuade Jesus to bypass the cross and gain the victory by the obvious strategies of human success, the Lord said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan” (Matthew 16:23). How did Peter, the lead disciple, go so shockingly wrong? Jesus explained: “You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Peter did not have to set his mind on the things of Satan to become useful to Satan. All he had to do was set his mind on the things of man, on obvious, understandable human things, like popularity. That’s all it takes, to play into Satan’s hands. That is a Christian problem. It was then, and it is now. But we don’t see it. Which is why Jesus had to *tell* Peter what was really going on. All Peter had to do, to serve Satan, was just proceed in his own way, without being overruled by the counterintuitive ways of God. If we are not consciously redirecting ourselves into the surprising ways of God, he stops using us and must say to us as, in fact, he said to no one less than the apostle Peter: “You are a hindrance to me.” To stay in the zone of faith and repentance and openness and prayer and watchfulness and thanksgiving – it is searching and costly deep inside. It isn’t easy. But it is glorious to serve the Lord in the power of the Lord for the glory of the Lord. He is in it.

And isn’t that the great thing about depending on the power of God? It means the pressure’s off! We don’t have to pull any rabbits out of our hats. Moment by moment, real Christianity is and always has been coming down to us from above, in answer to prayer. Real Christianity is and always has been dependent upon nothing in this world. *Real Christianity is not primarily management; real Christianity is constant miracle.*

Our generation is bombarded with hype and grandiosity. But *no one* takes that seriously enough to stake their life on it. They like it. They’ll pay to go see a Super Bowl halftime extravaganza. But it doesn’t change them. It leaves them exactly as they were before. And that’s our opportunity in our churches, with all our ordinariness. *Any church today continuing steadfastly in prayer has all the potential for the breakthrough power of the early church.* Simplicity and honesty and dependence are *advantages*, because then there’s room for the glory of God.

Now, if you’re like me and you like not only the Bible but also late 60s rock and roll, then how about the Doors and their amazing debut album in 1967? Here is what I found on the Gibson guitar website:

Of all the albums that formed the soundtrack to 1967’s “Summer of Love,” *The Doors* is the one least tethered to its time. More importantly, The Doors’ self-titled disc remains one of the greatest debuts in rock history. To this day, few albums sound more inspired. “We stayed away from trendy clichés,” producer Paul Rothchild said in the Jim Morrison biography, *Break On Through*. “I asked the band if they wanted to be remembered in 20 years, and they said, Yes. I told them that, in that case, we couldn’t use any tricks. It had to stay honest and it had to be pure.”

Can’t the people of God be at least as shrewd as Jim Morrison and the Doors?

Lesslie Newbigin, the British missiologist, wisely wrote:

There has been a long tradition which sees the mission of the Church primarily as obedience to a command. It has been customary to speak of “the missionary mandate.” This way of putting the matter is certainly not without justification, and yet it seems to me that it misses the point. It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel. If one looks at the New Testament evidence one gets another impression. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving.

Brothers and sisters, that is what *only God* can do. It’s what we love and long for and pray for more and more, isn’t it?

So, how are we going to become *a movement of prayer*? How, exactly, is that going to happen, so that we live in Colossians 4:2 as our new, ongoing reality? What about us needs to change? We won’t be able to do everything we want. But if we will continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving, we will steward the present blessing well, and we will be ready for the glorious explosions God plans yet to detonate in this generation and the next.