

VI. Christ's Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia—Seven Distinctives
“#3: Earnest Prayer and Expository Preaching”
Acts 6:1–7
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
November 5, 2017 • Evening Sermon

In this study we will be covering this third distinctive of Christ's church. When He establishes a healthy, vital, revived church there are seven distinctives that happen. Each distinctive comes in twos so you may be thinking that there are really 14 but there is a reason for this. These seven distinctives with their couplets are two sides of one coin and no place is this more evident than in the one we will be looking at in this study – prayer and the Word. The Bible joins it, the Bible demands it, our life requires it and the church is to embrace it. It is not just one or the other but they go together. In this study I will try and establish this from God's Word and then look at each one of these.

One of the things we are constantly coming back to by design and by inquiry are these two issues of prayer and the Word, especially when one is going into the ministry. If I could go back in the beginning of my life and ministry I have always believed in the primacy of the Word of God preached and the priority of prayer, and that they are inseparately joined together. I would never change that but I would only ask God for the grace to pray more and preach better. I don't just believe that because the world would draw me to that for on the contrary the world thinks that the preaching of the Word of God is foolishness. The world would say the biggest waste of time would be to spend time in prayer. This past week I spent two hours with an individual talking with them about the importance of prayer. In our conversation we dug deeper and deeper as to why it is crucial in the life of a believer.

To call us back to the Reformation, *Sola Scriptura* is where the Scripture alone is our only rule of faith and practice. I believe in earnest prayer and expository preaching because the Bible says so. My conscience and life is to be captivated by the Word of God. It is not my intuition or the world that tells me to do this but it is the Word of God that tells me to do this. It is the crucial thing in every single church as well. Every church that is going to be healthy, revived and serving Jesus Christ must embrace the primacy of preaching and the priority of prayer. I could go to many texts in the Bible to expound on this but I am going to focus on Acts 6:1-7 and then I will make some observations about this.

Acts 6:1–7 says [1] *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. [2] And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. [3] Therefore, 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. [4] But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” [5] And 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. [6] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.*

[7] *And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

I'd like to put this text in context. The Gospel has been preached and 3,000 have come to Christ which is probably just counting the men. Then the Lord is adding to the church day by day those who are being saved. Everyday there is a conversion and then they have another extraordinary outreach in which 5,000 men and their families have come to the Lord. So with all these conversions we are probably looking at a church with about 12,000 to 18,000 people and God is blessing this church. These people were selling their possessions in order to give to those who were in need. They had a very active mercy ministry. They were opening their homes to one another and breaking bread with one another. Here is a church that is worshipping, growing and giving praise to God. They are probably worshipping from the courtyard of the Gentiles but most of the time the text indicates they were on the south side of Temple Mount called Solomon's Portico. Today there is a Mosque there. Another Mosque called the Dome of the Rock is where the Temple Proper would have been which would have been the Holy of Holies.

As all of this is taking place and the Gospel is expanding in Jerusalem and will go to Judea, Samaria and the utter most parts of the world, Satan is going to retreat, right? No, for when God opens the doors of heaven to bless Satan is going to open the gates of hell to oppose. But praise God Jesus says 'I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.' Here the gates of hell do not prevail with external persecution for that will come in Acts 7 when Stephen gets stoned, but it comes with internal dissention. Satan does this through grumbling and complaining. As this is happening a very specific charge is given. The leaders of this church, the 12 Apostles, are accused of racism, discrimination and partiality. Barnabas sold everything, gave a lot of much money and even changed his name but that money is not going to the widows of Hellenists. It's only going to the widows of the Hebrews and they notice that all 12 of the Apostles are all Hebrews. They seem to call this abject racism.

Here is a great example of leadership for they heard the sheep bleeding and they addressed the problem. It's like when a baby cries you know there's a problem but if you ask the baby what the problem is they may or may not be able to tell you but you as a parent will determine what the problem is. The Apostles who are acting as the elders of the church here realize that those are right in that they are not giving an equal distribution of the mercy ministry but the problem is not a spiritual problem where they are racists or being partial. They realize the problem is that they are not giving it enough attention. Naturally the ones who they would have known more of would have been Hebrew widows due to the fact that they were Hebrews so to do a better job they would have to get more information. To get more information they would have to distract themselves from prayer and the Word so two times in the text it says 'we must not neglect prayer and the Word' to serve tables.

The word tables here is not what we might think of actually setting up a table and serving someone. The word *table* in the Greek is the same word for *bank*. That's why back then banks were known as money tables that Jesus would turn over in the Temple. You don't have to get ordained to pick up dishes off the table but they were ordained because they were now in authority over the resources of the church. There is a reason our Book of Church Order has our deacons prepare the budget under the policies and oversight of the session. We are following this pattern. So here the seven deacons who were ordained in the church who take care of the administration, resources and mercy ministry of the church do this so that the leadership can focus on prayer and the Word.

It is not that the stewardship, mercy ministry and resources are of no value but they know that if they don't take care of prayer and the Word there will not be any resources to give or a heart to do mercy ministry. No one will be selling their possessions and giving. They realize

they have to make sure prayer and the Word is in place in order for the mercy and administration to be in place. When prayer and Word is there everything else is downstream for these are the two pillars of the church that are to be established. They can't solve this problem to create a bigger problem so they get some Godly men who meet these qualifications and ordain them to that task so that they can give attention to prayer and the Word. Now an appropriate administration of the resources and mercy ministry can take place.

So here you have a church of 12,000 to 18,000, with 12 leaders, doing prayer and the Word, discipling, have small groups, meeting day by day for worship, preaching and teaching yet they are kind of doing the mercy ministry out of their hip pockets. So they realize they have a functional problem and that is that they need to raise up the deacons. What happens when they solve the problem rightly? The Word kept increasing which produces spiritual growth and the number of disciples continued to increase which results in statistical growth. Notice the objective for it wasn't statistical growth but spiritual growth. The statistical growth was the consequence. When they realize they need to solve this problem they realize that prayer and the Word should not be neglected, so why would they realize that? There are a couple of reasons why they would not neglect this.

One reason they would not neglect prayer and the Word when solving this problem is because the Old Testament demanded that. What was the center point of the presence of God among God's Old Covenant people? It was the Temple. What was to take place in the Temple? Do you remember Nehemiah and Ezra? It was the teaching of the Word of God. When Jesus cleansed out the Temple He said in Mark 11:17, [17] *And He was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."* (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11) So there is instruction in the Word of God and we see this a number of times when Jesus came to the temple to teach and it was to be a place of prayer.

Now the Temple has been removed because now it is fulfilled in Jesus. John 1:14 says [14] *And the Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* When you look at Jesus' life and ministry you see Him teaching the Word and devoting Himself to prayer. He prayed so much His Disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. He made it His habit to pray in the morning and evening and He had places to pray. He went up on a mountain to pray, a garden in Jerusalem for that was a regular occurrence and withdraw to places to pray for there was always a time that He would give to prayer. So Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple which is to have the Word and prayer.

What is the church? We are the New Covenant temple. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19–20) so what should we be? In the assembled people of God we should be the Word of God and prayer. What about this church in Jerusalem? This church was conceived in a prayer meeting that we see in Acts 1. After the ascension of Jesus they went back to the Upper Room and there were 120 of them. They prayed and the Spirit of God came upon them. Then they went out in Acts 2 and Peter preached the Word. So in Acts 6 the church was conceived in a prayer meeting and in Acts 1 was birthed in a sermon. In Acts 2 we see prayer and the Word. Let's look at Acts 2.

Acts 2:42–47 says [42] *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. [44] And all who believed were together and had all things in common. [45] And they were selling their possessions and*

belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. [46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Here is the early church and in this church that was conceived in a prayer meeting, birthed in a sermon is matured and growing spiritually and statistically through the Apostle's teaching which is the ministry of the Word. The Word proclaimed then became the Word shared for they devoted themselves to the fellowship, not a fellowship and there is something very distinctive about Christian fellowship that is informed from the Word that you have heard. Then then have the ministry of the Word in worship in the display of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper which is what is being talked about here. This isn't the breaking of bread in homes but of the Lord's Supper. Then there are the prayers. This is where they return the Word back to God in prayer. God's Word frames your prayer life.

When you pray according to God's will that has two implications. On the one hand it means you surrender to His secret will. God, however You answer this I'm going to trust You because You are my Father and I know that You know what I need. I have told You my heart and reasoned with You now God not my will be done but Your will be done. Then there is the way that Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's prayer that says in Matthew 6:9–13; [9] *Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, **your will be done**, on earth as it is in heaven. [11] Give us this day our daily bread, [12] and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.* You not only surrender to His secret will but you are forming your prayer life to His revealed will.

That is what gave Moses such a powerful prayer life. Moses would go before God sometimes and tell Him 'God, you can't do that' but that's not because Moses has a better idea or that God needed Moses to tell Him what to do or not to do. God was moving in Moses and Moses would say 'God, You can't do this' because he would follow it with 'because You said...' and Moses would appeal to the Word. Moses' prayer requests would be framed by the Word of God.

Also we see that this church is matured by prayer and the Word. No wonder when Satan tried to attack that church internally with grumbling and complaining the Disciples said 'we're going to solve this problem' and praise God everyone got happy again. Most of all they solved it to honor the Lord and kept what needed to be there which meant whatever the sacrifice was to solve the problem they would not sacrifice the attention to prayer and the Word.

It is no accident when Paul sends Timothy back to revitalize the church in Ephesus that he opens up with 'here is true teaching,' the ministry of the Word in I Timothy 1. It's no accident he opens up with in I Timothy 2:1, [1] *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people...* Here is the Word and prayer, prayer and the Word displayed. He was putting this back into place when he went to lead that church back to health and vitality. So it is absolutely crucial that we understand prayer and the Word in the life of God's church.

Do you believe that Satan knows everything I just told you? If prayer and the Word are the two pillars of the church do you not think Satan is not going to try and stop both of them? Praise the Lord, for guess where our hope in Christ is to address what Satan is inevitably going to do? When Satan tries even to stop prayer and the Word not just for bad things but for good things to put even the good things in place of the best things. While the mercy ministry was a

good thing to do they wanted to make sure that prayer and the Word would not be neglected. So when Satan comes to get us off track in prayer and the Word we have prayer and the Word to keep us on track. So when he does that our antidote is to respond with prayer and the Word in the name of Christ.

When Paul describes the Christian life he tells us we are to put on the whole armor of God – shield of faith, breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the Spirit (which is the Word of God, the helmet of salvation. Where does faith come from? It comes from hearing the Word. The armory that you get the armor from is the Word and six times in Ephesus 6 Paul tells us to keep on praying. When Satan comes against you it is the Word you get the armor from in the name of the Lord and it is prayer that allows you to put on the whole armor of God to serve Him. I want to show you more about prayer and the Word by going to Luke 22.

Luke 22:31–32 says [31] “*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, [32] but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*” In the context of this, basically Jesus has said to all of His disciples that they will all fall away, leave Him. Peter is the one who said ‘They may but not me for I’m the one You can count on.’ And this is how Jesus responds to Peter. The translation for Luke 22:31, 32 is ‘Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have all ya’ll... but I have prayed for all ya’ll... The ‘you’ here is in these verses is plural. What is the difference between Peter and Judas? It is Jesus and intercessory prayer. Jesus goes on to say ‘when (not if) you have turned you will minister to My people.’

So I’d like to give you these four things. One, is Satan preys on leaders. There is a reason he would go after those 12 for they are the leaders that Jesus has prepared.

Secondly, Satan prays against leaders. If Satan is requesting or demanding permission who would he be talking to? He is talking to God. If Satan has brought a request then that is a prayer. We call that a prayer request. Satan made a prayer request of God. I’m sure he brought his reasons because these are sinners so he says they are his. Satan is arguing or demanding to sift them like wheat. Now they are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb so they belong to Jesus and not Satan. Is this new in the Bible? No, Satan does the same thing with Job.

The other week I had the privilege to pray with a young man who gave his life to Jesus Christ and I told him ‘You know Satan is going to attack you, don’t you? But here is what you know, Jesus has defeated Satan for greater is He that is in you than he who is in the world and God says that all things work together for good.’ So I got him ready for it because I knew it was coming. I tell leaders that not only does Satan attack you but you are in the crosshairs. If you are a deacon, elder, or pastor then you’re a leader and you are right in the crosshairs. So in this Luke passage Jesus tells them that they will all fall away but they are coming leaders that have been requested to be sifted that will say ‘we must not neglect prayer and the Word.’ But here they are under assault.

Thirdly, Jesus prays for His people. ‘I have prayed for you.’ You might think this was just for Peter but the Bible says in Romans 8:31–34, [31] *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, **who indeed is interceding for us.** Jesus prays for His leaders.*

Fourthly, we are to pray to Jesus for our leaders. We should intercede to the Intercessor for our leaders because we know they are under the assault of the evil one. So earnest prayer is

what we need to give ourselves and be engaged in. I will cover expository preaching in the next study since we are running short on time for this study. Now I'd like to give you the three directives of our prayer life as a congregation.

Number one, are the prayers of intercession. We need to intercede for our leaders and our leaders need to intercede for our people. In our session and diaconate meetings I don't think there is anything more important than when we pass out all the names of the people in our congregation month after month to pray through them. We will not only pray for you once a year but if you have a prayer request at any time then you send it to us and we'll pray for you. That's important for us to pray for you and for you to let us know how to pray for you. These requests should be even done through congregational communities to reach another whole level there. We do six prayers every Sunday during worship and we're going to keep on praying them because we are going to give attention to the prayers, plural. There is personal prayer, public prayer, formal prayer, informal prayer, spontaneous prayer, set prayers, intercessory prayers and all kinds of prayers and supplications that we are to make as God's people. Prayer is to be a way of life but intercessory prayer is crucial.

Number two, are prayers of importunity. Al Baker has the best phrase for this. He says these are when we are praying for the Great Commission and the Great Commandment to the throne of grace and we are importuning upon God. We are persistently calling upon God with an intolerable burden. After one Sunday service waiting outside of my office was one of our members who was a doctor and now I see why they say if you can't have your attack at the hospital in Birmingham have it at Briarwood because it was absolutely wonderful to see how people surrounded this man in our congregation when he was having heart problems. He was actually my heart doctor and I thought 'how can you be my heart doctor if you can't take care of your own, but I was one who was helping when this happened to him. I was astounded at how people here responded but I'll never forget looking up and seeing hundreds of people from surrounding windows and around us, a wife and our staff calling upon God. Our God decided in His sovereign grace and mercy to respond as we were praying because four times this man flat-lined but at 2pm that afternoon I had the chance to talk with him. God restored Him but I'll never forget the way people were praying.

I'm okay with starter prayers like 'Lord, I lay me down to sleep...' and 'God is good, God is great...' and others but it's amazing when you get an intolerable burden for something how you start calling upon God. It becomes intense, personal, persistent and protracted and that is what begins to happen with that burden we have. We have a world to win for Jesus Christ. We have a nation that is in an unbelievable need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Lord, Your commands we cannot do without Your strength so come Lord and empower us. Come and go before us. Come and reach out beyond us. Come and multiply the little that we have and make it much. Come God and do Your work in our life that we need to have. We need to have that prayer of importunity.

Thirdly are the prayers of intimacy. A dear, sweet lady in our congregation came to me this last week and was telling me about the many times we pray but then do not listen. I'm not talking about that you pray and then you will get special revelation but God has promised His ministry of illumination. It says in His Word that if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God. God gives it liberally, wisdom from above. God takes this Word that He has already given to us and by His Spirit begins to give us wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding and direction. Sometimes that illumination is so powerful it is like that whisper is like He is shouting in my ear but listen for Him when you talk to Him, when you pray to Him. Listen for Him to speak to your

heart as He gives you wisdom from above. As God begins to lay burdens on your heart, lead you into particular areas listen to Him. Also don't be so arrogant as to think that if God is leading you somewhere that everybody else needs to be led to that as well for that's not necessarily so.

I remember this one time a person was talking with me about this wonderful ministry of adoption which I am grateful for but they said 'Pastor, I just think everybody ought to adopt someone.' I said 'As the pastor of this church there are some here that, that would be the last thing you would want them to do would be to adopt a kid' but that doesn't mean that as a body of Christ we don't embrace it and move with our various gifts in that area. It is just like how some are gifted in evangelism but we all evangelize. So we need to be careful as we listen to God that we don't think that what He is telling us is for everyone else as well.

I will just close with this. Listen to Him. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. This is how that starts. James 4:2b-3 says [2b] *You do not have, because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* I tell this to people all the time. You do not need to teach people to pray. They are going to pray. Even an atheist will pray for you just watch what he prays when his hand gets hit with a hammer. It won't be a good prayer but he'll pray. Pagans, heathens, Pharisees, those who are superstitious pray for everybody prays.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:5-8, [5] *"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. [6] But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. [7] "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. [8] Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Jesus also said not to pray like the Pharisees who think they can merit the movement of God but He tells us how to pray in Matthew 6:9-13 which says [9] *Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, **your will be done**, on earth as it is in heaven. [11] Give us this day our daily bread, [12] and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.* Pray intercession. Pray with persistence and importunity just like the parable of the persistent widow who kept going to the judge (Luke 18:1-8) and pray with intimacy.

Speak to your Lord and draw near to Him for He will draw near to you. This is not saying that your prayers merit God's attention. No, you have God's attention because of what Jesus did on the cross. He is a Good Father. You might say 'God if I ask for a fish You say You won't give me a snake and if I ask for bread You won't give me a stone, so why didn't You give it to me?' but that wasn't bread you asked for. That was a stone you asked Him for. You thought it was bread but it was actually a stone. You know that job you thought you wanted or that relationship you thought for sure you were supposed to get, what you didn't know was that there was a Sodom and Gomorrah hidden in the valley of that and I (the Father) kept you from it. It looked like a rich valley to you though, didn't it? That is not what it was but our Father knows what we need.

We call on Him in prayer. We call on God to send revival and a Gospel awakening and we call on Him in intimacy. Call upon Him and then our quarrels will be dismissed, our discrimination disappears, our partiality flees and then we begin to see the world through the Word of God to the glory of God and may the joy of the Lord fill your soul. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You so much for the opportunity to be together in Your Word. I thank You for my brothers and sisters in Christ. God, I thank You for Your patience with me as I keep thinking I can get it all in but I can't. I thank You that You give us some time to work through this. So as we come back to the exposition of Your Word and prayer in our next study prepare our hearts this week to hear from You. Speak to our hearts that we from our hearts will call upon You in the prayers of intercession, importunity and intimacy. Speak O Lord, Your servants listen, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

The Two Pillars of the Church

Earnest Prayer

Expository Preaching