

them with ease and power into the ways of righteousness and peace. Men throng to him as to a banquet. He is the people's preacher. The other churches are respectable but cold ; their galleries are very often thin, and the spirit of life and of power does not seem to be in them.

SEC. 19. *Conducting a Prayer-Meeting.*

As a Christian body, depending upon common aid, looking for common blessings, working for a common object, bound by common hopes, the Church of Christ feel an instinctive drawing together in the exercise and expression of their devotional desires. To worship together once a week in the sanctuary is not enough. Among many Christian denominations disciples are constrained to meet often in the name of Jesus, relying on his clear promise.

The prayer-meeting is important, because it is one of the chief means of maintaining the Church's life ; and the meeting is difficult to sustain, because the spirit of prayer is the expression of the spiritual life of the Church, and because certain reasons beyond the prayer-meeting itself—beyond the power of the pastor—are constantly at work to deaden the faith of the Church.

Yet much may be done to render the prayer-meeting attractive and efficient for good.

In the first place, the pastor should indoctrinate his people, or they themselves should be thoroughly established, in three fundamental truths.

1. In a perfect faith in the power, duty, and privilege of prayer. Prayer is both the natural and appointed means of spiritual life ; it is a real communion with the source of all spiritual life ; it is the necessary demand whose supply is in

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God ; and it brings the human heart into a condition to be blessed ; as says Jeremy Taylor, the spirit "ascends and dwells with God, until it returns laden with the dew and blessing of heaven ;" and it follows that a Christian, or a Christian church, that neglects this means of intercourse with God, cannot expect to live or have power. There should be no lingering unbelief here. The power of prayer may be seen in this, that, as we cannot doubt, something besides the mere mechanical regulation of the material world has entered into the purpose of the Creator, and that the physical is subordinated to the spiritual. God is, above all, a moral and spiritual ruler. He is the source of law and of right. He must be ever on the side of goodness, and of religious truth and life ; and if a man or a church lives in the power of this truth, with perfect trust in God as his helper and guide, he will go to God in prayer, and his wants will have God's attention. Prayer is the expression of the Church's faith in and union with God, and of the using of this power. The church accustomed to pray, like a plant is always receiving the dews and refreshings of heaven. The essence of prayer, then, is spiritual, and not in the forms of words. Filial trust, faith, love, conscious dependence, unbounded confidence in the Father's promise, accompanied by personal holiness and harmony with the holy will of God—these make prayer, and make it effectual. Dean Stanley says of private prayer, and this may apply to the prayer of the whole Church : " We acknowledge the duty, we have learned it from our earliest years ; the very practice carries us back to the best days of our childhood. Once lose the habit and it may be hard to begin again ; but once get a firm hold of it, and you will feel that to have left it off, for a single morning or a single evening, is like dropping one of your daily employ-

ments, like striking off one of your supplies of daily strength, like throwing away one of your best opportunities of being what a Christian ought to be and wishes to be."

2. In the need of unity of the spirit in prayer. This unity is created by the Holy Spirit, who brings discordant spirits into one, in the will of God.

Unity of the Spirit. Differences of will in the Church are occasioned by unbelief, pride, jealousy, ambition, indifference to truth, in fine, the working of the selfish principle; such differences prove the absence of the Spirit, or of the spiritual mind. Personal controversies, strifes for precedence, sectarian conflicts, doctrinal errors and discords, all human things that separate, abound where the life of the Spirit does not abound; but when Christians are brought into one mind, with one accord, there is the uniting work of the divine Spirit, and prayers become the inspiration of the Spirit, the utterances of the desires of Christ's heart, and are powerful with God; and that is the place, above all others, which draws the assimilating love and power of Heaven to it. This unity of the spirit of the Church implies also true repentance, the humble, obedient, and holy mind, brought into one with the mind and spirit of God and of his holy kingdom and people. Instead of many centres, as in the world, where every individual will is its own centre of life and purpose, there is one common centre of life in Christ;¹ and this is the work of the unifying Spirit.

3. The cultivation of a spirit of constant prayer and supplication. Christians, we are told, should "pray always with all prayer;" they should "continue instant

¹ See Maurice's Letter to Palmer.

in prayer." The whole life of the Christian should be, in Origen's words, "one great continual prayer," for this is the expression of an abiding faith in God as the real Strengthener, Vindicator, Redeemer of the soul. The church member, therefore, should not expect to be made prayerful at the prayer-meeting if he carries thither no spirit of prayer; but he should live in such a prayerful state, that to meet his brethren to pray is but giving an opportunity for the manifestation of this spirit, and is therefore the greatest of privileges. Christians coming together without the spirit of prayer, with cold hearts, will kindle no new life, but will help to freeze one another; while, on the other hand, the concourse of truly believing, praying, loving hearts, will produce a more powerful flame of devotion, so that each and all will glow with increased ardor, and advance more rapidly in holiness.

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constant
prayer.**

The pastor should also set forth the reasons or motives which should draw Christians to the social prayer-meeting, as to the most profitable of all their meetings and services—such motives as the love of a common Saviour, fidelity to covenant vows and obligations, and the attainment of higher spiritual life. A constant attendance upon the meeting of social prayer will tell powerfully upon a Christian's life and character, as will a constant neglect of the prayer-meeting. As disciples of Christ, we cannot live alone: we are born into a household; and there can be, as a general rule, no great advance made in holiness, away from the common life, the common hope, the common love. One cannot well grow holy entirely by himself. And, lastly, he should urge the motive of advancement of Christ's work. This must come, and can come only, through common prayer and striving. What

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Christian can be exempted from this? There is a work to be done, as well as a holiness to be attained. Other souls are to be converted and built up in the faith, as well as one's own soul to be purified and saved ; and a genuine desire to benefit men will bring Christians to the prayer-meeting, to seek God's aid, to obtain strength to work. The answer to their prayers for the conversion and good of men is often, we doubt not, in God's making *them* the instrumentality in doing this work, endowing them with a winning and overcoming power. Thus we hold that prayer should be always accompanied by the earnest, vigorous use of every other instrumentality of good. Prayer does not take the place of active effort. Good is not accomplished by men's praying and not working. A church may pray for the conversion of the world till doomsday ; but if it lifts not a finger to aid the cause, and goes not forth, with strenuous purpose and self-denying labor, to bring the new kingdom of light and love into men's hearts, the world, as far as that church is concerned, will roll darkling on forever. Prayer aids work, prompts the best methods, inspires Christian zeal, and makes it successful.

But in regard to the meeting itself, so much depends upon the pastor for its right conduct, that he, above others, should be prepared in his own mind and heart, and should not approach it with a cold, preoccupied mind ; for an unspiritual leader kills the life of the prayer-meeting. There is an intellectual preparation which he should make in his selection of the passage of Scripture, the hymns, the theme of prayer and contemplation, and the general direction to be given to the meeting, which lend it interest, aim, and depth.

Let us look now at some things to be avoided in the conduct of a prayer-meeting.

Self-confidence and self-display. In all the pastor says and does he should reprove this spirit in himself and in others. He should impress the conviction that it is a meeting with God for divine ends, and not for the exhibition of man's methods, thoughts, or powers. There may be freedom, freshness, intellectual life, brought in, but there should be no display of these, and there is no spot where such display is more out of place. The presence of God, the desire to reach God, the hungering and thirsting after the gifts and life of God—in a word, the devotional character of the meeting—should not be lost sight of ; it is not a meeting for preaching, but for prayer ; the didactic, the intellectual, the human element, should make place for the devotional ; all the remarks and instruction should be but for the purpose of guiding the soul in its petitions, and awakening faith in the power of prayer and the nearness of God.

Things to be avoided in a prayer-meeting.

A complaining, petulant, desponding spirit. There may be solemn admonition and faithful pleading (indeed, this is the time for saying plain things) ; but to give way to a discouraged, fault-finding spirit is wrong toward God, and it extinguishes what feeble hope there may be. It does no good to be always telling the church how dead and cold it is ; but let there be life in one's self, and that will communicate itself to others. Some church-members are in a chronic state of complaint, and this is their only capital. They should be silenced by the breath and prevalence of a higher spirit. Let the prayer-meeting be a serious and thoughtful, but still a cheerful place—a place of light when all around and outside may seem dark. True emotion is not often highly intensified, but rather expressive of an even sentiment of cheerful hope. If this is the tone of the prayer-meeting, troubled and

restless souls will run to it for comfort, peace, and refreshment.

Monotonousness. While there may be a certain degree of steady uniformity, the meeting should not be permitted to fall into a groove. One Christian brother—especially the pastor—should not do all the praying or speaking; neither should one truth or aspect of truth—not even the subject of a reviving of faith—become a fixed theme of remark or petition. Routine should be broken up, if needful, by bold summary methods. Different minds should be brought out; all talents should be developed; the monstrous error that one should be past forty or fifty years old before he has a right to speak in a prayer-meeting should be exploded, and young men should be summoned to the front. Passing events should be taken advantage of, and the present moment should be infused into the meeting.

Long prayers. “Where weariness begins, devotion ends.” Long prayers, long remarks, long hymns, and long exercises, excepting in times of extraordinary interest, are dull things. The meeting should rarely run over the appointed hour; but while there should be no miserable rule as to time, yet there should be prompt movement in the meeting. All should be natural, fluent, and free. Brethren should be encouraged to pray for what they want, for no less and no more. There should be a basis of sincere desire in every petition offered, and nothing should be uttered for form’s sake. If this principle were observed, the prayers of the best Christians would be abbreviated; for how much more do Christians often ask for in their prayers than they desire! The Lord’s Prayer, which comprehends this world and eternity, how short it is! The publican’s prayer, how few its words! The feeling that one is obliged to make a

long prayer, or a long address, prevents many a modest man from taking part in the exercises, who, perhaps, would be able and willing to utter one valuable thought springing from his own experience, or to put up one humble petition from the depths of his soul.

But let us now look at the things to be specially cared and sought for in the conduct of a prayer-meeting.

A full attendance. The pastor, to bring about this result, will find it necessary to converse privately with persons, as well as instruct publicly on the subject. He should kindly admonish Christians of their duty to Christ and his kingdom, and thus warn or win, if possible, all church-members to come, with more or less regularity, to the prayer-meeting ; and, above all, the pastor should be present himself, and lead the meeting.

Things to be sought for in a prayer-meeting.

A good beginning. A veteran laborer in God's vineyard says that the pastor, or leader, should call upon the most spiritual first to strike the key-note of the meeting ; for it rarely rises above its beginning. It is well to have one definite truth for meditation, springing from the Word of God, and thus the meeting will be grounded in the spirit and will of God ; but no method should be rigid.

Freedom. It sometimes happens that a church-member, from age, character, or will, obtains a licensed tyranny over a prayer-meeting, to the repression of spontaneous feeling and speech on the part of the other members ; which domination over the free utterance of the brotherhood should not be submitted to. The pastor should jealously guard the freedom of the meeting, and should nourish the most timid manifestations of the Spirit from all true followers of Christ. He should

encourage all expression of sincere thought and desire, and he should suffer no undue influence of any kind to weigh upon the perfect freedom of the meeting, not even the too great freedom of some.

Point. Even in the wording of prayer there should be direct and precise language. Superfluous sentences, long parentheses, vague and unmeaning expressions, should be avoided in the pastor's prayer; and this will teach others; but, above all, there should be definiteness of object in the petition; something in particular should be prayed for; and it need not always be, as we have said, specifically, a revival of faith, but some other object which bears upon the spiritual interests of the people, and which may be preparatory to a higher spiritual life; such as ignorance and darkness of mind in regard to divine things; the critical state of the country; some afflicting event or bereavement of general interest; the need of a better understanding and obedience of some principle of morality; some needed reform; some doctrine or grace, which has, perhaps, lain long neglected; the religious welfare of business men; the prevailing evils of the community; the condition of the impenitent of the congregation; the preaching of the Word on the "Lord's day;" the religious state and training of the young; family religion; the growth of holiness in the individual heart.

Life. Whatever else the prayer-meeting fails in, it should have life. Living thoughts, living prayers, coming from the heart of man, and going to the heart of God, should be sought for. The Holy Spirit—the "Creator Spirit"—should truly inspire the prayers, and breathe new life through the services. Coldness, deadness, sin, unbelief, are nothing but the results of the soul's separation from God; and this fellowship with God

the Spirit, being renewed, there comes life in the souls of God's children, and this is manifested to all in their prayers. Through all that is said and done, there should pour an ever-flowing current of life from the fountain of life.

Fervent faith. Such a faith is invincible ; and the believer prays on, whether there be few or many to pray with him, grateful for the least answers of prayer, hungering and thirsting to be filled, believing that the prayer will be answered, and that the blessing will surely come. The woman of old time who was willing to take the crumbs that fell from the master's table, is a type of this humble but courageous spirit, faithful in times of declension, living in the love of God, never distrusting Christ, never despairing of his aid. One such praying believer, though the humblest of the flock, is an inestimable possession to any church, and should be greatly valued by the pastor ; for such a soul forms a perpetual germ of revived life.

In conclusion, the prayer-meeting should be something real—it should mean progress in holy living, in purity, in love, and in every good work for men. It should prepare Christians to serve Christ. It should string their nerves to fight the good fight. It should not be sustained simply because it is the custom of the church to have such a meeting, and because it has come down from the most ancient and even apostolic times ; but it should be regarded as an actual working power—as a means of present good. By it, the preaching of the Word may be greatly aided ; for without the prayers of the church, the preaching of the pastor is not likely to be successful, since the power of the Spirit must be concurrent with the publication of the truth.