

Leaders Called

Series: *Prayer in the Book of Acts*

October 1, 2023

Acts 6:1-7; 1:21-26; 14:23, etc.

Today we continue our series called *A Church that Prays*, which is all about the subject of prayer in of Acts.

The early Christian church we read about in the book of Acts was indeed a growing church—an astonishingly fast-growing church. In Acts, we read statements like:

... three thousand were added to their number that day.¹

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.²

So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples... increased rapidly...³

In the book of Acts, we see that **the church grew because it prayed, and it prayed because it grew.**

We see the first Christians constantly at prayer throughout Acts, and the text often links such prayer with church's growth and expansion.

We also see that when the church was faced with the challenges that inevitably come with rapid growth, their first instinct was to pray through those challenges. As a result, the church kept right on growing, reaching more and more people for Jesus in more and more places.

The church grew because it prayed, and it prayed because it grew.

If you've been here for any length of time, you know that by God's grace, Cornerstone has been growing a lot since we opened this facility back in 2015. Even during the pandemic and these early post-pandemic years, we've continued to grow as a church to the point where we now have some space challenges, especially at our 9:30 service.

A few weeks ago, we even invited those of you who regularly attend the packed 9:30 service to consider shifting to the 11:30 service, where there's still room left to grow, in order to make space for others that God is leading to connect with Cornerstone. This is

¹ Acts 2:41b (NIV)

² Acts 2:47b (NIV)

³ Acts 6:7a (NIV)

especially the case for families with younger children, because our Sunday school rooms are maxed out during the 9:30 service.

That said, it's not like Cornerstone has grown at the levels we read about in the book of Acts. I mean, I can hardly fathom what it would be like to deal with an influx of 3000 people over the course of five or even ten years, let alone a single day. Can you imagine it?

Still, we *have* grown considerably from the days when we were a small church plant back in the late 90's, to a church that's now approaching some 1200 people in weekly worship attendance. Not to mention the impact we have each week on hundreds of additional local residents through our community programs, like Parent and Tot, pickle ball, volleyball, midweek Youth rec, our Food Pantry and Open Table Thursday community dinners.

But I'm convinced that our growth over the years has much more to do with our prayers than it does with our programs. We grew because we prayed. In fact, prayer is one of our stated Core Values here at Cornerstone, and we've endeavoured to live by that.

No matter what else we've have done, no matter how hard we've worked, no matter how talented, smart or credentialed the people of this congregation may be—remove prayer from the equation, and Cornerstone not have grown like we have, and indeed, the church may well have folded altogether.

We grew because we prayed. It's not like the *only* thing we did was pray. We did many other things as well—important things. But there's no question in my mind that prayer has been the most essential piece of the growth puzzle for Cornerstone.

About 8 years ago, a survey was done of some 500 Canadian churches that were actually growing. Should we be surprised to learn that this survey found that the power of prayer was one of the most critical factors in the growth of these churches?

This should not surprise us at all. Because prayer connects us with God who alone is the source of all growth—both the church's growth, as well as your personal growth and mine. Prayer releases the divine love that transforms us, the divine wisdom that guides us, the divine provision that meets our every need, the divine strength to help us persevere when the going gets tough, and the divine power to reach the world around us for Jesus.

So Cornerstone has grown because we've prayed. And now, God is calling us to pray all the more precisely because we've been growing so much. We've grown because we prayed. And now we pray because we've grown.

We see that early church prayed when they faced the inevitable challenges that come with growth, and we need to as well. Because:

- A growing church is a threat to the enemy, and is therefore a prime target for spiritual attack.
- A growing church is always changing, and is therefore vulnerable to relational strain and internal conflict.
- And a growing church faces the critical need of raising up more and more leaders to shepherd an ever-increasing number of disciples.

In fact, throughout Acts, we see an intimate connection between prayer and Christian leadership. In the time that remains I'd like to share with you **two essential lessons about prayer and leadership** from the book of Acts. The first lesson is simply that:

1. **Christian leaders pray.**

They lead *out of* a prayer-filled life, and they lead others *into* a prayer-filled life.

Acts chapter 2 tells us that in the first community of Christians:

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals, and to prayer.⁴

So the first Christians were *devoted* to prayer. Not just their leaders. *All the believers* were, says the text.

But this was the case, in no small part, because they were led by leaders who themselves were devoted to prayer—leaders who followed Jesus' own example of a prayer-filled life and who led the other believers to do the same.

For instance, Acts chapter 6 tells about how the fast-growing Jerusalem church faced its first real crisis of unity. The Greek-speaking believers were complaining against the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

But surprisingly, the twelve apostles resisted the pull to get directly involved in sorting out the details of this feeding program themselves, as necessary and worthy as the program was. Instead:

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the

⁴ Acts 2:42 (NLT)

Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”⁵

So the Twelve apostles saw prayer as one of their top two priorities—along with biblical teaching—to the point that they were relentlessly intentional about making sure they didn’t get so busy with other ministry demands that they didn’t have ample time and headspace to pray.

And when the church had selected seven men to run the feeding program, what was the first thing the apostles did? They *prayed* over them, committing them to the work of this important ministry.

Here’s what happened as a result:

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.⁶

Fast-forward to Acts 8, where we read about how another church leader— Philip— leads this royal official from Ethiopia to faith in Jesus, and then baptizes him on the spot.⁷

This remarkable encounter began when the Holy Spirit had directed Philip to travel down a certain road, and then to stand next to a certain chariot. The Ethiopian official was passing through the area, and happened to be sitting in that very chariot, trying to make sense of scripture.

Prayer, you see, is two-way conversation. We speak to God, and if we learn to listen, God also speaks to us by his Spirit. The point is, Philip is another example of a church leader who prayed. Through this single encounter, the gospel’s impact would reach all the way into Africa, as this royal official travelled home to Ethiopia with Jesus in his heart. And it all started because Philip was conversing with God in prayer.

The apostle Peter also led the church out of a prayer-filled life. Acts chapters 10-11 tell the story of how he was praying on a rooftop when God gave him a special vision followed by shocking instructions to go meet with a non-Jewish man named Cornelius.⁸

You see, Jews and Gentiles weren’t supposed to hang out, like, ever. But Peter obeyed the vision and instructions he received in prayer, and it led to the inclusion of the first non-Jews (or Gentiles) in the Christian church. As a result of this encounter, the church would soon include people of all backgrounds throughout the known world.

⁵ Acts 6:2-4 (NIV)

⁶ Acts 6:7 (NIV)

⁷ See Acts 8:26-40

⁸ See Acts 10: –11:18

Paul would of course become the apostle to the Gentiles. Once a ruthless persecutor of Christians, he was converted after a radical encounter with the risen Jesus. In Acts, some of the first words we hear about Paul after his conversion are spoken by the Spirit of Jesus himself to another Christian leader named Ananias:

The Lord said, "Go to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man of Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now."⁹

So the beginning of Paul's life as a follower of Jesus, and as a Christian leader, is marked by prayer. And as we see from the rest of Acts and from all of his New Testament writings, this would be the first of countless moments in his life when Jesus could have said the exact same thing about Paul: "He is praying to me right now."

These examples from Acts make it clear that Christian leaders pray. They lead *out of* prayer, and lead others *into* prayer. Prayer is of course essential for *all* Christian believers. But it's the church's leaders who are called to set the prayer tone for the entire church. As the saying goes, "Speed of the leader, speed of the team."

So let me take a moment now to speak specifically to those of you who lead at Cornerstone in one way or another. This includes:

- The pastors and all members of our Executive, Ministry and Operations Staff teams
- Board members
- Worship leaders
- Leaders of our Children's and Youth ministries
- Small Group leaders
- Welcome Team leaders
- Leaders of Local and Global outreach teams
- Recreation program leaders

And it also extends to:

- Those who lead in ministries or businesses or other contexts outside of Cornerstone
- Those who lead their families at home

All of you who lead: How often could Jesus say of you what he said of Paul? How often could Jesus say of you, "He or she is praying to me right now"?

Could Jesus say that of you often? Sometimes? Occasionally? Rarely? What's Jesus saying to you right now about your prayer life as a Christian leader? How is he challenging you?

Do you pray for the group or team or class or kids or youth that you lead? How might your impact for Jesus as a leader be different if you were committed to doing so regularly?

⁹ Acts 9:11 (NLT)

And how's your private prayer life, by the way? Do you live and walk in vital connection with Jesus through prayer, knowing that apart from him, you can do nothing, no matter how smart or talented you may be? Without prayer, can you really expect to effectively lead others in his ways?

Maybe you want to push back a little, and say, "Steve, the examples of leaders that you gave from Acts were mostly apostles. I'm no apostle. I'm just a Sunday school teacher. I'm just a small group leader. I just lead a team of ushers or greeters. I'm just a parent trying to raise my kids."

Okay, so you're not an apostle. Fair enough. Neither am I. But consider this: If Jesus and his apostles had the need to lead out of a prayer-filled life, do you and I have any *less* of a need to do so?

Whatever your leadership assignment, make sure you lead out of a prayer-filled life. Christian leadership is more than just prayer alone, but there's no way you can be an effective Christian leader without it. For the sake of its God-given mission, the church needs its leaders to live prayer-filled lives.

Whether you're a leader or not, if you need some help with your prayer life, I encourage you to check out our prayer page: cornerstonechurch.ca/prayer. If you scroll down on that page, you'll find several downloadable prayer resources you can use to help you in your prayer life.

As well, there's a prayer app I recommend called **Lectio 365**. Many folks in this church have been using it and finding it really helpful for their daily time with God. It includes wonderful morning and evening prayers each day, along with rich scripture meditations and helpful reflections. You can read the prayers, or use the audio version which allows you to pray along as you listen, with tasteful instrumental music in the background. It's available to download for free in your app store—check it out!

We're looking at two essential lessons about prayer and leadership from the book of Acts. The first was that Christian leaders pray. The second lesson is to:

2. **Pray for Christian leaders (current and future).**

At various places in the book of Acts, we see the church actively praying for its **current leaders**.

For example, Acts chapter 12 tells us how Peter was seized and arrested for preaching the gospel publicly. In verse 5 we read:

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.¹⁰

The chapter goes on to describe Peter's miraculous release.

In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit directs the church to set apart Paul and Barnabas for special missionary work. And the text says:

So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.¹¹

In Acts 14, Luke tells us that:

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord.¹²

So it's quite clear that leaders were well-covered with prayer in the early church.

The apostle Paul himself wasn't at all shy to ask fellow believers to pray for him. As powerful as his own prayer life was, as a church leader he knew how desperately he also needed the prayers of fellow believers. Here are just two of many examples of this found in Paul's writings.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.¹³

On [God] we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.¹⁴

You see, the devil is well-aware of the saying "strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep." He often uses this strategy against the church. The enemy knows that every time he can take a Christian leader out, the damage done to the church as a whole gets multiplied many times over.

In recent years, there have been many stories coming to light of churches of substantial influence completely falling apart. Why? Well, the enemy struck the leaders of those churches hard, resulting in confusion, disillusionment, pain, and heartbreak throughout those congregations, and among Christians around the world.

Friends, for the sake of the church and its mission, your pastors and leaders desperately need your prayers, because we have enemy targets on our backs. Spiritual warfare is a real

¹⁰ Acts 12:5 (NIV)

¹¹ Acts 13:3 (NIV)

¹² Acts 14:23 (NIV)

¹³ Romans 15:30 (NIV)

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:10b-11a (NIV)

thing, and prayer is one of our most potent and essential weapons against the devil's schemes and attacks.

Yes, Christian leaders need to pray, but at the same time, the whole church needs to be praying for its leaders.

I've been thinking a lot lately about that Old Testament story in Exodus 17 when the Israelites were attacked by their enemies, the Amalekites. Moses, Israel's leader, went to the top of a hill where he could see the battle unfolding. The text says that:

As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset.¹⁵

Israel won that battle.

As followers of Jesus, we do not fight against flesh and blood enemies, says the Bible in Ephesians. Rather, we fight against the spiritual forces of darkness.¹⁶

And those of us who are called to lead need to be holding up our hands in prayer on behalf of the church, like Moses did for Israel. As we do, we need all of you to be our Aaron and Hur, upholding us with your prayers.

As the great hymn writer William Cowper once put it:

Satan trembles when he sees
the weakest saint upon his knees.
While Moses stood with arms spread wide
success was found on Israel's side
But when through weariness they fail'd
That moment Amalek prevailed.

- William Cowper

May Amalek never prevail here, Cornerstone! May we always be the kind of church that holds up our leaders in prayer, even as they hold us up in theirs—amen?

In fact, I'd like to pause now to have a short time of prayer for Cornerstone's leaders. If you have a leadership role of any kind here at Cornerstone—whether you're a pastor, staff member, board member, worship leader, small group leader, ministry team leader, youth

¹⁵ Exodus 17:11-12 (NIV)

¹⁶ See Ephesians 6:10-20

leader, Sunday school teacher— whatever— I'd like to ask you to stand to your feet now. Please don't hesitate, just go ahead and stand, because we're going to pray for all of you.

Now, I'd like to ask the rest of you to stand as well, and please hold your outstretched arm in the direction of the leader or leaders standing closest to you. Now let's bow together, and I invite you to repeat this prayer aloud after me, phrase by phrase:

Heavenly Father, we pray for our leaders. Thank you for each one. Renew them in you, Lord. Grow their prayer lives. Keep them strong in Jesus. We pray for their well-being in every way— spiritually, emotionally, relationally, physically. Fill each one afresh with your Spirit. Deliver them from the evil one. Guard their hearts and minds. Protect their marriages and families. Give them wisdom and integrity, that they may lead your people well. Make them abundantly fruitful as they abide in Jesus. And let us not forget to keep them covered in prayer. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thanks for your prayers everyone, and thanks, leaders, for your ministry.

Now, we not only need to be praying for our current church leaders, as essential as that clearly is. We need to be praying for our **future leaders** as well—those who may not be leading now, but who will be called by God to do so, perhaps soon.

We see this theme in the very first chapter of Acts, and in other places of the book as well.

When Acts begins, only eleven of Jesus' original twelve disciples remained. Judas, filled with remorse about his betrayal of Jesus, had taken his own life. Peter, quoting the Psalms, said to the other believers:

May another take his place of leadership.¹⁷

Then Peter said:

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.¹⁸

¹⁷ Acts 1:20b (see also Psalm 109:8)

¹⁸ Acts 1:21-26 (NIV)

What I want you to notice about this passage is that when they were choosing a new leader— in this case, the twelfth apostle— they prayed for God to reveal to them the right person for the position.

We see the same principle being lived out in Acts 13. During a gathering of the church in Antioch, it says that:

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting [which would have included plenty of prayer], the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.¹⁹

In the book of Acts, we can clearly see that prayer was an integral part of identifying, affirming, and calling new leaders in the church. That’s the title of this sermon, in fact: Leaders Called.

All this should really come as no surprise when you consider how prayer was integral to Jesus’ selection of his twelve apostles— those who would become the church’s main leaders.

Acts, you see, is volume two of a 2-part work by Luke. Volume one, of course, is Luke’s gospel. Both volumes emphasize the necessity of prayer. In chapter 6 of his gospel, Luke tells us that:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.²⁰

Like Jesus, and like the first Christians we read about in Acts, we too need to be praying for our future leaders.

We need to pray that God will give us eyes to see those with leadership potential.

We need to pray that God will help us discern who he wants us to invest in today so that they will be prepared to lead the church tomorrow— at every level of leadership in every area of ministry.

In fact, for those of you who lead here at Cornerstone—at whatever level of leadership in whatever area of ministry— I have a challenge. As you go about your ministry role— whether you’re leading a worship team, a welcome team, a small group, a class of kids, a group of junior or senior highs—whether you’re a member of our board, our Ministry Staff

¹⁹ Acts 13:2-3 (NIV)

²⁰ Luke 6:12-13 (NIV)

Team or our Executive Staff Team—would you commit to praying the following prayer earnestly in the months ahead:

Lord Jesus, show me who you are calling into leadership.

Make this your breath prayer as you live and serve week in and week out. And just see what the Lord shows you. See who he brings to your attention as a potential future leader.

From there, there will of course be conversations to be had, asks to be made, onboarding and training and coaching to be done. All that will come in due time.

In fact, next year we'll be re-visiting the development of a multi-layered leadership development strategy here at Cornerstone, called a Leadership Pipeline. This is something that we had begun working on prior to the pandemic, but then we had to pivot to focus on other things. So we'll be working on that again next year.

But one step at a time. For now, your assignment—especially if you lead in this church in some way, shape, or form—is to pray, “Lord Jesus, show me who you are calling into leadership.” And be paying attention to what he shows you.

This morning, we've seen two essential lessons on prayer and Christian leadership in the book of Acts:

First, Christian leaders pray.

Second, pray for Christian leaders (both current and future leaders).

I close with a story about praying for future leaders from Cornerstone's history that I hope will encourage you.

Back in 2007, Cornerstone's former Youth Pastor resigned, and we were looking for someone to replace him. A number of candidates sent us their resumes, and the interview process began.

Two candidates stood head and shoulders above the rest. One was a guy you might have heard of, by the name of Kevin White. The other, although his name now escapes me, was every bit as strong a candidate as Kevin was, both on paper, and in the interview.

The question before us was: Which of these two excellent candidates should we hire? We did not know. How were we able to come to a decision? Prayer.

Together and on our own, those of us entrusted with making the decision prayed, asking God to affirm which person he would have us hire as Cornerstone's next Youth Pastor.

For my own part in the story, I remember doing prayer walks in my neighbourhood at night, asking God to reveal who we should hire, trying to listen to what the Holy Spirit was

saying as I paced the sidewalks. I developed a strong sense that God wanted us to hire Kevin.

And when those of us who had been praying on our own got together and compared notes, we all felt the same way. Kevin was our guy. He was the leader God was affirming for that position.

Question: Do you think it was the right decision?

I think so too, and one of the affirmations is that when we hired Kevin, we grew. We grew in numbers. We turned a corner in terms of racial and cultural diversity as a church. Our youth ministry was solidly established.

The hiring of Kevin was one of the many times where we grew because we prayed—all glory and thanks be to the God who answered our prayers and gave us such clear direction. Fast-forward to today, and we've grown even more dramatically by God's grace alone, which was released through our prayers.

We grew because we prayed. And now we need to pray all the more, because we grew.

That will include not only the possibility of praying through some other staff hires now and then. More than anything, it will be about everyone here who leads praying a prayer like, "Jesus, who are you calling into leadership?" and watching for who the Lord points out, so that new people will be raised up at every level of leadership in every area of ministry, just like we read about in the book of Acts.

Then, perhaps what was said about the church in Acts will also be said about Cornerstone:

So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples... increased rapidly...²¹

Communion

²¹ Acts 6:7a (NIV)