

God's House of Prayer—Extreme Makeover Edition

By Stanley D. Gale

“My house will be a house of prayer for the nations.” Those words of God recorded by Isaiah the prophet would be picked up by Jesus in each of the Synoptic Gospels, and alluded to by John in his Gospel account. This identity and mission ascribed to the Temple were not lost with its destruction in 70 A. D. They continue to describe and direct Christ's church in our day. In fact, we can say that *the vision of every church must be to be a house of prayer.*

Some will insist, “We already have a vision statement over which we have labored long and hard.” Being a house of prayer, however, does not supplant a church's vision. It doesn't even supplement it. Being a house of prayer overlays its vision, surrounding it and animating it at every point, in every way, at all times. We might think of prayer being the drive train to the vehicle that is a church's mission by which it pursues the vision God has laid before it, for the sake of His kingdom.

What is a house of prayer? What does it look like in operation? We must note at the outset that being a house of prayer means more than having a weekly prayer meeting or including prayer as part of the Sunday worship service. It means more than prayer events in a church facility or a smattering of prayer activities on the schedule. These may be expressions of being a house of prayer but they are not constituent of it any more than are a CD player or GPS in a car. The vehicle can function without either. But Christ's church cannot function properly and fruitfully apart from prayer.

Becoming a house of prayer involves *inculcating a culture of prayer* into a church's mentality and mission, where prayer is necessary to life and function, the reflex of faith to all ministry present and prospective. The vision of my local church is based on John 15, where Jesus gives us the metaphor of the Vine and the branches. We summarize our vision this way: “to be a branch growing deeply in the Vine of Life, filling West Chester with the hope of life.”

When we superimpose God's vision for us as a house of prayer, it helps us to understand that we will grow as a branch deeply rooted in Christ, filling the region for Christ only in the greenhouse of prayer. There, at the superintendence of the divine Vinedresser, we will be cultivated and pruned to grow in depth and breadth.

The goal of this paper seeks to reinstate a divinely-mandated identity and function for the local church in pursuit of its kingdom calling. We will explore the house of prayer concept, tracing it from its Old Testament genesis, through its reinforcement in Jesus' day, to its outworking in the new covenant community of faith. We will conclude with some specific ideas for what the local church as a bustling house of prayer looks like in practice.

House of Prayer in the Old Testament

The first explicit mention of the phrase “house of prayer” in the Old Testament is found in Isaiah's prophecy of salvation to the nations.

“These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.” Isaiah 56:7–8 (ESV)

The “these” brought by God refers to Gentiles and to outcasts of Israel, as reflected in the remarkable expansive statement found earlier in the book.

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.” Isaiah 19:23–25 (ESV)

This single people of God anticipates the throng gathered around the throne in the book of Revelation, “a people from every nation tongue and tribe.” There they worship the Lamb on the throne, alive now as One slain in substitution for them (Rev. 5; cf. Eph. 2:11-22). The assembly consists of true worshipers sought by the Father (John 4:23-26), believing Jews and believing Gentiles bought by the blood of the true Passover Lamb (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7), who have believed the gospel (Rom. 1:17-18).

At its essence “house of prayer” reflects God’s covenant promises and purposes, intended for the blessing of the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). It speaks of *access* to the true and living God in deliverance from the idolatry of the nations characteristic of this fallen world. House of prayer carries the sense of *relationship* with God (in divinely-initiated communion with Him as King) and *service* to God (in divinely-mandated commission for Him in His kingdom.)

Solomon in his dedicatory prayer for the temple points to the house that God had built and where He had caused His name to dwell. There is no other such house that than appointed by God (cf. Deut 12:1-7).

...that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. 1 Kings 8:29–30 (ESV)

So in its Old Testament framework the temple is identified as a house of prayer for both Israel and the nations (cf. 2 Chron. 6:21, 32-33), all those the Lord would draw to Himself. As such it relates to God’s covenant purpose of forming a people for His own possession, who would be identified with Him and who would serve Him in following His decrees and designs. It carries ideas of worship and witness in knowledge of the living and true God, in contradistinction from the nations still moribund in the bondage of sin. Access to God brings prominence, power and the fruits of redemptive relationship.

Prayer was associated with covenant promise and relationship, access to God and authenticity of worship, and the appointed priesthood. The temple was a place of prayer and a focus of prayer because the living and true God had caused His name to dwell there. God promised attentiveness to prayer made in respect to the temple (cf. 2 Chron. 7:15).

In one sense, the temple served a mediatorial function as part of the old covenant sacrificial system and ceremonial law. It would be realized and consummated in the person and work of Jesus Christ as Immanuel, Mediator and Messiah, who tabernacled among us (John 1:14).

House of Prayer in Jesus' Day

The idea of God's house being a house of prayer announced by Isaiah still applied in Jesus' day. However, it had been compromised.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." Matthew 21:12–13 (ESV)

Jesus reiterates that His Father's house is a house of prayer (Mark adds the phrase from Isaiah, "for the nations," while Luke omits it in line with Matthew.) In emphatic fashion He rebukes the religious leaders (who ultimately were responsible for temple activities) for making it a den of robbers.

In so doing, Jesus establishes two things. One, the identity and purpose of His Father's house still stands. Two, the religious leaders of the day had high-jacked God's house for their own purposes.

With Jesus' castigation ringing in our ears, it profits us to pause for personal assessment. Have we made Christ's church, the temple of God's Spirit, something other than what our God intends? Have we commandeered it for our own ends and even our own glory? I am mindful of John Bunyan's stinging insight in his book *The Holy War*:

(Lucifer's strategy) Mr. Sweet-world and Mr. Present-good are two men of civility and cunning. Let those engaged in this business for us, and let Mansoul be taken with much business, and if possible with much pleasure and this is the way to get ground of them. Let us but cumber and occupy and amuse Mansoul sufficiently, and they will make their castle a warehouse for goods instead of a garrison for men of war.

Today the church triumphant has been substituted for the church militant by the caprice of church leaders for its consumers. In like fashion, we may be guilty of making the church a business venture or religious social club or an ecclesiastical YMCA with its family programming offerings.

Returning to take stock of the concept in Jesus' day, we gain some sense of what God has in mind by house of prayer. Placement of the cleansing of the temple event in the narrative flow provides insight.

The Synoptic Gospels include Jesus' comment *after* the Triumphal Entry, connecting it to His messianic identity and mission. There is some variation in order as Matthew includes Jesus' cursing of the fig tree after the cleansing of the temple, while Mark inserts the cleansing between Jesus' two-fold lesson of the fig tree. Luke does not relate the incident with the fig tree, instead recording the temple cleansing after Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem and His announcing the destruction of the temple because of the people's apostasy.

Taken together, the common theme seems to be failure to live up to expectations, *God's* expectations. The barren fig tree stands symbolic of a failed Jewish leadership, a failed city to be holy, a failed temple. God's prophetic word had been violated. His intention dismissed. His purpose for His house exchanged for man's (shades of satanic machination). The fruitless fig tree symbolizes the failure of the first covenant and its centerpiece, the temple and sacrificial system.

John differs from the Synoptics in his Gospel account by not making mention of Isaiah's prophecy regarding a house of prayer. However, he does quote Jesus in asserting that the temple had been made a den of thieves, carrying echoes of Jesus' rebuke for deviation from God's purpose for the temple.

In addition, John's reference occurs at the beginning of his Gospel rather than at the Triumphal Entry, and holds unique aspects. One, John comments from Ps. 69:9 that "zeal for the Father's house" would consume Jesus. Two, John quotes Jesus as referring to *Himself* as the temple that would be destroyed and raised up, making Himself the house of prayer that would be raised up and restored to God's purpose and realized in fulfillment. By "zeal" it seems (negatively) that Jesus would not countenance man's violation of His Father's purpose for His house, and (positively) that God has plans remaining in place. Jesus spoke most stridently (in righteous anger) when protecting the Father's glory against those who would revile His name and scorn His purpose.

So Jesus' day brings correction, reaffirmation, transition and fulfillment. He sets the stage for what He would want His church to be and to do as a house of prayer for the sake of His kingdom.

New Covenant House of Prayer

Clearly, the temple as a house of prayer continued in force and design in Jesus' day. The new wrinkle is that Jesus presents Himself as the temple, by virtue of His resurrection victory.

The epistles of the New Testament develop the concept further, the ultimate vision for God's house being depicted in the Book of Revelation. In particular, Revelation 21 describes the walls of the temple giving way in covenant fulfillment to God dwelling with His people without barrier (Rev. 21:3). When the vista of heaven is presented, the temple edifice is conspicuously absent in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:22).

For now, however, in this period between Christ's reign on high for His church and His return in glory to claim her for whom He died, the church is to understand itself as a house of prayer for the nations. Paul emphasizes this on a number of fronts.

Prominent is the identification of the church with the temple. By virtue of our union with Christ, *we as the people of God corporately are the temple of God*. In his letter to the Ephesians, which lays great stress on the church visible and invisible, Paul declares as conclusion to God's covenant intention:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2:19–22 (ESV)

The new covenant community is seen as a temple in which God Himself lives and through which He works.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV)

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." 2 Corinthians 6:16 (ESV)

The fact that we are the temple of God, God's house, means a number of things for us. We are to be holy to God, undefiled among the nations, a testimony to grace and a visible expression of the kingdom. We are not our own; we have been bought with a price, built through grace. We are also to understand ourselves to be a house of prayer.

This temple is not some edifice we go to in order to pray. We as that temple are to know the presence of God with us in relationship. As a holy priesthood we are to serve the purpose of God with us in the exercise of our divine mandate. Our prayers are expression of sacrifice (cf. Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:3f.) Being a house of prayer speaks to our being in special relationship with God and in a special role for God.

Prayer is not supplemental but essential to us as a temple in which God dwells by His Spirit. No wonder the New Testament is so saturated with teaching on prayer, examples of prayer and calls to prayer.

Look again at the letter to the Ephesians in which Paul emphasizes the church, the Holy Spirit and resurrection power. It is no surprise that prayer finds a place of prominence, not just as a topic or one offering among many. Prayer takes on an atmospheric feel, necessary to sustain life and foster what is necessary for growth and mission. From the prayers of Paul for them in Ephesians 1:16-23 and 3:14-21 to the plea to them for prayer in Ephesians 6:18-21, prayer is expected and necessary.

Remembering that the church is built by Christ laying siege to the gates of hell, subduing subjects of the kingdom of this fallen world to Himself, Paul asks for prayer. He requests prayer for himself, his message and his hearers in the face of spiritual opposition.

...praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. Ephesians 6:18-20 (ESV)

In other words, ministry for the sake of Christ finds its efficacy through prayer. Kingdom movement gains its drive through prayer. It is as the church maintains its identity as a house of prayer in God's design rather than a den of thieves for its own ends that its ministry will prosper.

So God's purpose for the temple as a house of prayer anticipated in the Abrahamic covenant and articulated in Isaiah comes to focus in Christ as *the* temple. He is risen with an indestructible body, reigns on high interceding for His church, and will return in glory. Now we as believers enfolded into new covenant community with new covenant commission are that temple by virtue of our union with Christ. As God's house, we are to function as a house of prayer.

The Local Church as a House of Prayer

God's vision for His people is that they be a house of prayer for the nations. Christ's zeal is that we as His church be faithful in that kingdom calling. What does this look like at the local level? How does the congregation carry out its role as a house of prayer?

As we've seen, a house of prayer does not speak to an edifice to which people come or in which people gather. It involves more than a weekly prayer meeting. Rather, it refers to how we understand ourselves and how we function in the exercise of our responsibility to pray. As we said, becoming a house of prayer involves *maintaining an identity for prayer and creating a culture of prayer*, where prayer is necessary to life and function, the reflex of faith to all ministry present and prospective.

We need to keep in mind our call to be a house of prayer issued in the Old Testament and reiterated by our Lord. In the model of our Messiah, we need to be fueled by zeal for God's house. At the same time, we must heed our Lord's warning not to use God's house for our own ends or glory. That zeal will ensure that prayer is prominent and pervasive.

God gives to the elders of the church the responsibility to pray themselves in their role as shepherd-leaders (Acts 6:4; 20:28; Eph. 1:16-23; 3:14-21) and to mobilize the saints in prayer (Eph. 4:11-16; 6:18-20). Becoming a house of prayer requires intention, commitment and effort. It is most decidedly a building project, itself fueled by prayer in reliance upon the Master Builder (cf. Ps. 127.1). The elders must diligently seek God for His direction and empowerment.

What might the elders put in place to lead the local congregation in being a house of prayer? There is no set answer, but there is a plethora of possibilities. It involves those things profitable for inculcating a heart for prayer and cultivating a culture of prayer. Prayer must become the environment that sustains life and growth. Just as an oxygen-deprived atmosphere will prompt lethargy and weakness, so an atmosphere deficient in prayer will lead to stunted growth and ineffective ministry. A prayer-rich atmosphere animates, enlivens and invigorates the body of Christ.

Prayer must become reflexive and responsive. That happens only by keeping prayer at the fore in all things. Encounters of all sorts should be prefaced by prayer and punctuated in prayer, in communion with God and dependence upon Him. In addition, the congregation must be educated in prayer, equipped for prayer, provided opportunities to be engaged in prayer corporately and privately, and encouraged in the work of prayer.

In practice, substantial prayer, not token, must be part of the weekly service of worship. Avenues for prayer must be in place, promoted and well used. Published prayer sheets, pew cards and prayer chains are typical examples, but options are limited only by creativity or circumstance. Stated forums for corporate prayer could be established. That the church might be known as a house of prayer its people can be trained in evangelistic prayer and take to the streets for public ministry of prayer.

All these efforts represent but some ideas for cultivating a culture of prayer in a local church. The important thing is that each church give attention in light of its own situation to how it can be faithful in serving Christ as a house of prayer its people are to be.

Aside from the abuses against which our Lord Jesus warns, there's really no wrong way to go about it. The only wrong would be its neglect.

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