VITALITY OF PRAYER FOR INDIVIDUALS AND CHURCHES: AN ANALYSIS OF PRAYER AND HOW IT SHAPES AND INFLUENCES SPIRITUAL HEALTH

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Abstract

Prayer is one of those spiritual disciplines that are part of every spirituality and religious tradition. Not only that, but prayer is also central to Christian spirituality, yet its familiarity in Christian language can obscure the different ways it is understood and practised. This article examines prayer as both a personal spiritual discipline and a formative practice of the gathered church. It aims to develop a biblical working definition and a five-part typology, i.e., adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, confession, and petition. It considers how these forms orient believers toward God and their neighbour. Analyzing biblical texts, research on prayer practices, and studies of religious socialization, this paper argues that prayer contributes to Christian formation not only through private devotion but also through shared practices of worship, mutual care, discernment, and mission. The empirical evidence is based on surveys that measure different populations and dimensions of prayer, understanding that associations between religious practices and outcomes do not establish natural causation. The article concludes that corporate prayer should be cultivated as a regular practice through which Christian communities learn to express dependence on God, bear one another's burdens, and discern their participation in God's mission.

Keywords: Prayer; Corporate Prayer; Spiritual Formation; Ecclesiology; Church Vitality

Introduction

Prayer is a familiar spiritual discipline in a Christian's life. However, such familiarity can lead some to assume that prayer is automatic and self-evident. Nevertheless, Christians pray privately, pray in worship services, participate in prayer meetings, and learn prayers from Scripture and other believers. These practices overlap, but they are not identical. An account of prayer's significance for spiritual

health must therefore distinguish personal prayer from corporate participation and must explain how each relates to Christian formation.

Canadian research has provided a useful context for this discussion. In 2022, the Cardus Institute released a research report named *The Shifting Landscape of Faith in Canada,*[1] finding that among Canadians who identified as Spiritually Uncertain, 1 percent attended a religious service at least once a month, but 10 percent prayed at least once a month. Among those who identify themselves as Privately Faithful, 15 percent attend a religious service once a month, and 84 percent prayed at least once a month. Furthermore, among those Religiously Committed, 74 percent attend a religious service at least once a Month, when 99 percent prayed at least once a Month.

Therefore, keeping a life of prayer indicates a type of faith that goes beyond the corporate setting, and this data indicated a tendency to keep some sort of relationship with God outside of the elements of organized religion. It is important to point out that, based on this data, it is not possible to identify the quality of the prayer lives of the Canadian individuals. However, the quality of prayer lives of Canadian individuals affirms that individual practices of spiritual disciplines are more commonly found in the private life than in public settings.

It is true that claims about change over time requires additional caution. Surveys conducted in different years may use different samples, definitions, and questions. A percentage measuring monthly prayer in one study should not be compared directly with a figure from another study unless the populations and measures are sufficiently comparable. Research on religious identity, frequency of prayer, and attendance at organised worship also addresses different questions. This article therefore uses survey findings as context rather than as conclusive proof that corporate prayer has declined in Canadian churches.

The theological question remains important: if prayer is a practice through which Christians express dependence on God, learn to attend to the needs of others, and discern their calling, what is lost when prayer is treated almost exclusively as a private activity?

The New Testament portrays prayer as both personal and communal. Jesus warns against praying to gain public recognition and commends prayer in the privacy of one's room (Matt 6:5–6). In the same teaching, however, he gives his disciples a communal pattern that begins, "Our Father" (Matt 6:9–13). The plural language of

[1] Ray Pennings and Jenisa Los, *The Shifting Landscape of Faith in Canada* (Hamilton, ON: Cardus, 2022).

the prayer places the individual worshipper within a community of people who share dependence on God, daily needs, forgiveness, and the desire for deliverance. Private devotion and shared prayer should therefore not be set against one another; both belong within the broader life of discipleship.

Acts likewise depicts believers praying together in moments of waiting, conflict, discernment, and mission (Acts 1:14; 4:23–31; 13:1–3). These accounts do not prove that every communal prayer meeting will produce unity or growth. They do show, however, that shared prayer is part of the practices through which early Christian communities respond to God and to the demands of their common life. Jesus himself teaches us in the Gospel of Matt 18: 18-20 (NIV):

> [18] "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.[19] "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. [20] For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Matt 18:18–20 should be read within Jesus' wider teaching about conflict, accountability, and restoration in the community (Matt 18:15–20). The promise concerning two or three gathered in Jesus' name is therefore not simply a guarantee that any request made by a small group will be granted. In context, it belongs to the church's responsibility to address wrongdoing and seek restoration under Jesus' authority. This setting strengthens this article's argument: corporate prayer is not merely a technique for securing desired outcomes, but part of the gathered community's dependence on Christ as it pursues truth, reconciliation, and faithful discernment.

This article argues that corporate prayer is a formative ecclesial practice rather than merely an activity organised by a church or an extension of individual devotion. Corporate prayer is prayer undertaken by believers together as a gathered Christian community, whether in worship, prayer meetings, small groups, pastoral care, or shared ministry. Its distinctive feature is not simply the presence of more than one person, but the community's shared expression of worship, and discernment before God.

The article proceeds in three stages: first, it conceptualises prayer and identifies a five-part typology; second, it considers prayer's relationship to individual spiritual health; and third, it examines the distinctive contribution of corporate prayer to the

spiritual health of the church. The central concern is not to establish that formal training is necessary before a person can pray, but to explain how prayer is shaped and sustained within Christian discipleship and why shared prayer matters for the life of the church.

Conceptualising prayer is necessary because the term is familiar but can refer to a range of practices. The working definition offered here understands prayer as relational communication with God, shaped by divine revelation and expressed through worship, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. This definition recognises that people can address God spontaneously, while also affirming that Christian prayer is formed and normed by Scripture and by the community's understanding of God.

In a United States-based research, Pew Research Center brought forth a report entitled "Religion in Everyday Life."[2] When analyzing the essentials of Christian Identity, six affirmations are highlighted as foundational: 1) believing in God; 2) praying regularly; 3) reading the Bible; 4) attending religious services; 5) helping in congregation; and 6) helping on Sabbath. When asked about what is "essential" to being Christian, 86 percent of all Christians (Protestant and Catholic) will affirm that believing in God is essential, whereas 63 percent answer that praying daily is essential. Other relevant data points out that 42 percent believe that reading the Bible, 36 percent attending religious services, 28 percent helping in congregation and 18 percent resting on a Sabbath as essential to being Christian. When looking at the Evangelicals alone, 79 percent will affirm that praying is essential.

Therefore, the data demonstrates that there is the understanding among Christians that praying is essential to being a follower of Christ. With that in mind, it is important to understand why such practice is essential.

The Angus Reid Institute's 2016 report, "Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada,"[3] provides context for the range of prayer practices reported by Canadians. According to the report, 50 percent of those who pray described prayer as a personal conversation with God, 6 percent reported using only memorised prayers, and 41 percent reported using both memorised and spontaneous prayer. These figures indicate that prayer may be expressed through both personal language and received

[2] Pew Research Center, *Religion in Everyday Life* (2016).
[3] Angus Reid Institute, "Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada," May 8, 2016.

forms. They do not, by themselves, establish how people acquire those practices or which forms contribute most to spiritual health.

The article therefore does not assume that prayer requires formal training to begin. People may address God spontaneously, just as the disciples' request in Luke 11:1 recognises that prayer can also be taught, modelled, and deepened. The distinction is between the capacity to pray and the formation of a mature Christian practice of prayer. Scripture, pastoral guidance, memorised prayers, and participation in the praying community can give believers language, patterns, and theological orientation that may develop their prayer over time.

The New Testament presents prayer as integral to the life of the church. In Matt 21:13, when confronting the religious leadership who was causing the temple to become a market, Jesus quotes Isa 56.7 and affirms that the House of the Lord is to be called a House of Prayer. Furthermore, when the Church of Christ is being founded in Acts 2: 41,42, the foundation of the Body of Christ is based on teaching, fellowship and prayer:

> [41]Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. [42]They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (NIV)

The article's practical concern is to consider how congregations can cultivate a healthy corporate life of prayer as part of the ordinary practices through which the Body of Christ expresses dependence on God, cares for its members, and participates in God's mission. The discussion proceeds by conceptualizing prayer, considering its relation to individual spiritual formation, and then examining its formative significance for the church, with particular attention to the biblical and empirical case for corporate prayer.

Conceptualizing Prayer

The biblical vocabulary of prayer is diverse, but two important terms provide useful starting points for conceptualizing prayer: the Hebrew word פָּלַל (palal) and the Greek, προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*). The Hebrew word, palal, appears more than 80 times in the Old Testament.

> פָּלַל is the principal Old Testament verb for prayer and intercession, appearing about eighty-four times from Genesis to Zechariah. Its use in particular passages can illuminate prayer as a movement into God's presence to seek mercy, justice, guidance, or deliverance for oneself or others. Because the act invites divine evaluation, it shapes personal holiness, national destiny, and eschatological hope[4].

The noun works in the reflexive form which brings an idea of self-assessment or self-examination. Because of that, praying in Hebrew brings the idea of placing oneself under God's assessment and judgment. Thus, the main idea is not asking for things but being positioned rightly before the Almighty God.

In the New Testament, the idea is very similar. According to the Strong Greek Lexicon[5], in Greek, προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) appears 86 times and can be found in the Gospels, Acts, Pauline and General Letters.

> The verb is commonly used to represent direct address to God, whether petition, thanksgiving, confession, or intercession. Its distribution displays three major spheres: the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, the formative experience of the early church, and the ongoing instruction to believers.[6]

The verb is formed from *pros* ("toward") and *euche* (to wish, to vow). Therefore, it denotes a direct, face-to-face orientation toward the divine. It is more than a simple desire or wish, but the term is commonly used for addressing God directly.

Based on that, and following Tim Keller's definition, prayer can be defined as a personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God.[7]

With Keller's definition in mind, it makes sense to deepen the conceptualization of prayer by discussing the types of prayer found in the Bible. Several scholars have attempted to propose a classification of prayer. In 2001, Richard Longenecker[8] published the book *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*. In the book, the authors discuss Christian prayer with greater focus in the NT but also

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[4] Lockman Foundation, *NAS Exhaustive Concordance*, 6419.
[5] James Strong, *Strong's Greek Lexicon*, electronic ed. (Biblesoft, 2011).
[6] Strong, *Greek Lexicon*.
[7] Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 36.
[8] Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

analyzes prayer in the OT and first-century Christianity. Drawing on the biblical material surveyed by Longenecker and broader Christian classifications of prayer, this article adopts five recurring forms as an analytical typology[9]: a) Adoration; b) Thanksgiving 3) Intercession; 4) Confession; 5) Petition.

The biblical teaching of Jesus provides an essential foundation for understanding how prayer is both practised and formed. In Matt 6:5–15, Jesus first corrects prayer performed for public recognition (vv. 5–6), then warns against empty repetition and teaches his disciples to address God as Father (vv. 7–9). The Lord's Prayer offers a pattern rather than a mechanical formula: it directs attention to God's name and kingdom, asks for daily provision, seeks forgiveness while calling the disciples to forgive others, and asks for deliverance from evil. The prayer therefore combines adoration, petition, confession, and concern for a community of people who share needs and responsibilities.

A Five-Part typology of Prayer

Therefore, prayer can be understood as a relational and communicative response to the knowledge of God through which believers express worship, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. This working definition is not intended to reduce prayer to a technique or to suggest that all prayer can be neatly classified. Rather, it provides a framework for examining how prayer relates to Christian belief, character, relationships, and communal life.

Before analyzing each type of prayer individually, it is valid to understand that empirical research about prayer came up with very similar findings about types of prayer. In 2022, Lowe, Wang and Chin analyzed the relationship between prayer type and mental health before and through the COVID-19 pandemic.[10] During the research, they identified four common forms of prayer: a) petitionary prayer – request for particular needs; b) colloquial prayer – informal conversation with God; c) ritual prayer – liturgical or memorized prayers; d) meditative prayer – reflection and adoration. Another research, conducted by Newman and Nezlek,[11] developed a prayer

[9] The typology proposed here is intended as an analytical framework rather than a prescriptive formula. The categories may overlap, and multiple forms of prayer may occur within a single prayer. The types of prayer may happen interchangeably and are no formulas defended here. The end goal is to help the Body of Christ to pray more often and with more understanding.

[10] Gabriel B. Lowe, David C. Wang, and Eu Gene Chin, "Experiential Avoidance Mediates the Relationship between Prayer Type and Mental Health before and through the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022): 652, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070652.

[11] Newman, Nezlek, and Thrash (2023) examined four forms of prayer: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. David B. Newman, John B. Nezlek, and Todd M. Thrash, "The Dynamics of Prayer in Daily Life and

inventory. They identified four types of prayer: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

This article uses a working definition considering a prayer-type typology that may be used as a tool to help individuals and churches pray more often and intentionally: 1) adoration; 2) thanksgiving; 3) intercession; 4) confession; and 5) petition.

The first type is Adoration. In Bible translation, this concept will usually be translated as *worship*. What makes this type of prayer interesting is that, biblically, it does not happen in a singular form. Adoration in the Bible is multidimensional. It is something expressed physically, also through vocal expression, with verbal confession, blessing God, and with obedient service.

Therefore, adoration is the type of prayer that comes as a result of the impact of being before a holy God. It is not fawning over God, but it is a recognition of who He is!

Foster affirms that adoration is the spontaneous yearning of the heart to worship, honor, magnify and bless God:

> In one sense adoration is not a special form of prayer, for all true prayer is saturated with it. It is the air in which prayer breathes, the sea in which prayer swims. In another sense, though, it *is* distinct from other kinds of prayer, for in adoration we enter the rarefied air of selfless devotion. We ask for nothing but to cherish him. We seek nothing but his exaltation.[12]

The second type is Thanksgiving. Influential authors on the topic of prayer, such as Foster[13] and Keller[14] tend to see thanksgiving as part of adoration. Although these practices overlap, they can also be distinguished analytically. Thanksgiving and praise are closely related, although they can emphasise different aspects of prayer. Thanksgiving expresses gratitude for what God has done, while praise often focuses on God's character and identity. In scripture, however, these dimensions frequently

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Implications for Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 124, no. 6 (2023): 1299–1313, https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000454.

[12] Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 81.

[13] Foster, *Prayer*, 83.

[14] Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014).

overlap. The Hebrew verb יָדָה (*Yādāh*), is used in contexts of thanksgiving, praise, and acknowledgement, illustrating the close relationship between these practices.

King David, for example, in Psa 136:1, declares: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever (NIV). For the rest of the Psalm, David will remember God's creation, salvation deeds and love towards Israel.

Thanksgiving involves recognition, public declaration and acts of devotion from those who have received God's grace. Lev 7:12 teaches that "if they offer it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering they are to offer thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, thin loaves made without yeast and brushed with oil, and thick loaves of the finest flour well-kneaded and with oil mixed in" (NIV). And the author of Hebrews reminds his readers that "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name" (Heb 13:15 NIV).

The next type of prayer found in the Word of God is Intercession. In Hebrews, there are two main words to define intercession: a) פָּגַע (pãga) – to plead, to intervene b) עָמַד ('ãmad) – to stand before. Both verbs bring the idea of coming in between two parts. In that way, it comes very close to the NT idea of ἐντυγχάνω (entynchánō). Therefore, the NAS Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries defines intercession as:

> the moment when two parties, paths, or events "meet." The encounter may be friendly, hostile, accidental, or intentional. From that literal idea grow metaphorical uses: an unexpected collision, a military clash, the arrival at a destination, or the spiritual act of pressing one's plea upon God so that prayer "meets" the need.[15]

In a Christian perspective, intercession conveys a purposeful approach to a superior on behalf of another. The verb is not casual prayer; it is an urgent appeal that carries the thought of access, advocacy, and prevailing representation. Whether voiced by accusers, prophets, the Holy Spirit, or the exalted Christ, it always describes speaking into the presence of authority with specific intent[16].

[15] Lockman Foundation, *NAS Exhaustive Concordance*.
[16] Lockman Foundation, *NAS Exhaustive Concordance*.

This definition aids in the understanding of why Jesus commands his disciples to pray for their enemies (Matt 5:44). In bringing their enemies before God, his disciples will learn how to humanize those who hurt them, in other words, they will work on forgiveness and aim for reconciliation.

The Bible also emphasises Confession as a type of Prayer. It is presented as an act of acknowledging the truth before God, particularly concerning sin and wrongdoing. In Psa 32:5, David describes acknowledging his sin rather than concealing his iniquity. In the NT, the verb ὁμολογέω (*homologeō)* can convey the idea of confessing or acknowledging, including the confession of sin in 1 John 1:9. Confession, therefore, involves more than admitting wrongdoing; it also means coming honestly before God and acknowledging the truth about sin, grace, and the need for forgiveness.

That is why King David, in Psa 32:3-5, will declare that

> 3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning
> all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my
> strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. 5 Then I
> acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I
> said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you
> forgave the guilt of my sin (NIV).

On the same note, the apostle James will also command the Church to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16, NIV).

Acknowledging the truth is an important step towards freedom and healing, whether it is related to one's soul or relationships. Jesus reminds his disciples of that when he affirms that "[i]f you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31b,32; NIV).

The last of the five types of prayer presented on this article is Petition. Foster offers the following distinction between petition and intercession: "When our asking is for ourselves it is called petition; when it is on behalf of others it is called intercession. Asking is at the heart of both experiences."[17]

When teaching his disciples about the way they should pray, Jesus says:

[17] Foster, Prayer, 180.

> 7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock
> and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks
> receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks,
> the door will be opened. 9 "Which of you, if your son asks for
> bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give
> him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to
> give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father
> in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matt 7:7-11 NIV)

Jesus recalls the Father-Child relationship between God and Jesus' disciples providing the understanding that the petition is the child-like expression of faith where "we bring our daily needs and desires before our heavenly Father."[18]

From Forms to Formation

Having established this typology of prayer, and with the support of the information presented, it is possible to come with the following conceptualization of prayer:

a) Prayer is relational. More than a technique, prayer is the language of the relationship between God and His children. In other words, prayer is how the covenantal relationship is expressed.
b) Prayer is theological. The goal is to develop dependency on the Lord. Therefore, prayer acknowledges that our daily needs as well as full transformation are dependent on God. It challenges the illusion of self-sufficiency and expresses our dependency on the Lord.
c) Prayer is missional. Prayer is one important way that Christ's disciples take part in God's ongoing work in the world and in the church. It does not function merely as an attempt to alter God's will; rather, it reorients the believer's desires towards God's purposes.
d) Prayer is formational. When the apostle Paul is teaching the church in Ephesus about living a life worthy of their calling (Ephesians 4-6), he concludes this long session by saying: Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's

[18] Foster, Prayer, 182.

people. (Eph 6:18, NIV). Therefore, prayer plays a role in the development of Christian character, as well as the preservation of one's faith.

Prayer and Individual Spiritual Health

After discussing the concept of prayer and developing a typology, the focus becomes to understand the reason why individuals pray, how they do so, how they have learned how to pray, and why this matters for a Christian. The main goal is to understand how prayer and spiritual health are related and how praying is a spiritual discipline that must be lived, taught and expected from those who follow Christ.

In 2016, in the research "*Religion in Everyday Life*," Pew Research Center requested those being interviewed to rank priorities citing each behaviour as "essential" to being a Christian.[19] Considering Christians, in general, the 10 first priorities were: 1) believing in God; 2) being grateful for what you have; 3) forgiving those who have wronged you; 4) being honest all times; 5) praying regularly; 6) working to help the poor; 7) committing to spend time with family; 8) reading the Bible; 9) attending religious services; 10) not losing temper.

When responses are dis-aggregated by Christian tradition, slight differences appear in the order of "essentials." Considering Evangelical Protestants, for example. the "essential priorities" are presented as: 1) believing in God; 2) forgiving those who wronged you; 3) praying regularly; 4) being grateful for what you have; 5) being honest all times. However, the "top 5" remains the same among denominations showing that Christians understand the most essential behaviours of being a Christ's follower: two vertical behaviours, i.e., relationship with God: 1) believing in God; 2) praying regularly; and three horizontal, i.e., relationship with others: 1) being grateful for what you have; 2) forgiving those who wronged you; 3) being honest all times.

Aligning this data with the information previously presented demonstrates that prayer is the most common faith practice among American adults, and that prayer comes in a multi-faceted way, the following question is raised: why would a Christian consider prayer important?

Recent empirical studies identify several recurring dimensions of prayer, including gratitude, petition, intercession, guidance, and emotional regulation[20]: a)

[19] Pew Research Center. Religion in Everyday Life, 2016.

[20] The following conclusions were based on the following Articles: Laura Upenieks, "Unpacking the Relationship Between Prayer and Anxiety: A Consideration of Prayer Types and Expectations in the United States," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 3 (2023): 1810–31, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-022-01708-0; Paul Froese and Jeremy E. Uecker, "Prayer in America: A Detailed Analysis of the Various Dimensions of Prayer," *Journal for the Scientific*

prayer is a way to demonstrate gratitude and thanksgiving; b) prayer is a collaborative problem-solving strategy; c) prayer is associated with aspects of mental health and psychological well-being; d) prayer is a relevant way to share one's faith; e) prayer is a method to seek solutions for needs.

Research on prayer also identifies a range of reported purposes, including thanksgiving, requests for help, guidance, concern for others, and the search for peace. In 2016, research led by the Angus Reid Institute[21] showed that, among those who pray at least once a week, a) 64 percent pray to thank God; b) 42 percent pray to ask for help; c) 40 percent pray to seek God's guidance; d) 35 percent pray to help others; e) 28 percent pray to find peace.

Nevertheless, such findings illuminate beliefs about Christian identity; they do not directly measure how often respondents perform each behaviour. A person may regard prayer as essential while praying infrequently, just as a person may pray without identifying with organised religion.

The same distinction matters when comparing prayer with other practices such as gratitude, forgiveness, honesty, Bible reading, and attendance at religious services. These practices may be connected in Christian formation, but a survey of what people consider essential to being Christian cannot establish that prayer causes the other behaviours. It is more accurate to say that the practices are part of a wider moral and religious picture of how people understand Christian life.

These results can be compared with the typology developed above, while recognising that survey categories and theological categories are not identical. The operational definition of prayer of the surveys should also be acknowledged: a study that counts requests, thanks, or other communication with God may not measure confession in the same way as this article's broader definition.

Christian theology has long associated prayer with perseverance, sanctification, gratitude, and dependence on God. Jesus regularly withdrew to pray (Luke 5:16), Paul instructs believers to pray continually and give thanks (1 Thess 5:17–18), and Phil 2:12–13 places human obedience within God's ongoing work in believers. These texts do not make prayer a simple measure of spiritual maturity, nor do they imply that those who struggle to pray are necessarily less faithful. They support the more modest

Study of Religion 61, nos. 3–4 (2022): 663–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12810; John R. Finney and H. Newton Malony Jr., "Empirical Studies of Christian Prayer: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 13, no. 2 (1985): 104–15, https://doi.org/10.1177/009164718501300203.

[21] Angus Reid Institute, "Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada."

claim that prayer is one of the practices through which Christian faith is expressed and nurtured.

Prayer may also challenge self-centredness. The Lord's Prayer begins with "Our Father" and includes petitions concerning daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance (Matt 6:9–13). Its language directs the praying person beyond isolated individual concerns. Paul's image of the church as one body—where the suffering of one member affects the others (1 Cor 12:12–27)—provides a theological account of the relationships that prayer can express and reinforce. It is not by chance that Bonhoeffer writes "The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."[22] Prayer, therefore, moves the believer to become part of a Body that defines his thoughts and actions. Paul says that: [12]" Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.[26] If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. [27] Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1Cor 12:12,26,27; NIV). Tim Keller affirms that:

> By praying with friends, you will be able to hear and see facets of Jesus that you have not yet perceived. [...] Knowing the Lord is communal and cumulative, we must pray and praise together. That way the more we share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have.[23]

Thus, the Bible presents not only a close relation with human expectation and needs, but ways to present them before God.

How Christians learn to pray

Because prayer is both spontaneous and shaped by Christian teaching, it is useful to consider how believers develop their practices over time. The question is not whether a person must be taught before being able to pray, but how Scripture, example, repetition, and participation can deepen the language and habits of Christian prayer.

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[22]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Study of Christian Community, Fellowship, and Shared Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978).

[23] Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 119.

The Angus Reid Institute published a report affirming that, in Canada, 50 percent of those who pray, do so by having a personal and spontaneous conversation with God; 6 percent only use memorized prayers; whereas 41 percent do both.[24]

A 2017 survey by Barna Group offers a complementary perspective on prayer practices in the United States.[25] Among American adults who had prayed in the previous three months, 82 percent most often prayed silently by themselves, 13 percent prayed audibly by themselves, 2 percent prayed audibly with another person or group, and 2 percent prayed collectively with a church. These findings suggest that prayer was predominantly an individual practice among the respondents surveyed. However, the results should not be directly compared with the Canadian findings because the studies examined different populations and used different survey measures.

If, on one hand, praying is so strongly an individual and individualized practice, on the other hand, learning how to pray is a result of collective experiences. According to the Angus Reid Institute, "childhood prayer habits are strongly correlated with both the likelihood and frequency of prayer as an adult."[26] As a matter of fact, 28 percent of those who prayed at least once a month as a child, pray daily as an adult. Whereas only 4 percent of those who never prayed as a child, pray daily as an adult. Even more alarming, 86 percent of those who never pray nowadays have also never prayed as a child.[27] These findings indicate a strong association between childhood prayer and adult prayer practices. They do not establish that childhood prayer alone causes later habits, since family context, religious identity, community participation, and other influences may also shape adult practice.

These data confirm what has been shown by relevant quantitative and qualitative research in the human sciences: prayer is strongly shaped by behavior, founded mainly in observation, repetition and trial. And it is less based on instinct and formal education. This does not mean that explicit teaching is absent or unnecessary. Scripture, pastoral guidance, memorised prayers, and communal instruction can give believers language and patterns they may not otherwise encounter. Informal modelling and intentional teaching are complementary dimensions of learning to pray.

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[24] Angus Reid Institute, "Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada."
[25] Barna Group, "Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray" August 15, 2017.
[26] Angus Reid Institute, "Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada.", 5.
[27] Angus Reid Institute, "Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada.", 6.

Naomi Haynes' ethnographic study, for instance, showed that learning how to pray involved learning the language and practices of the Christian community.[28] Similarly, Luhrmann found that prayer is related to learning the practices of attention and imagination that will help someone become attentive to perceived communication with God.[29] Read alongside Haynes, Luhrmann's research suggests that prayer may be nurtured through participation, language, attention, and repeated practice. These studies do not demonstrate that observation is the only or primary means of learning prayer, and they do not displace the formative role of Scripture and intentional teaching.

Taken together, these studies support a modest conclusion: prayer practices may be shaped through family influence, personal experience, instruction, and participation in worship, prayer meetings, and small groups. The relative importance of these influences will vary across individuals and communities. The biblical examples of Jesus teaching his disciples (Matt 6:5–15; Luke 11:1–13) also make clear that instruction and communal practice can complement one another.

Prayer, therefore, is a discipline that progressively becomes more personal. A healthy life of prayer involves using words learned with family or religious leaders, it also involves praying passages of the Bible, and it matures to developing a comfortable use of personal vocabulary, rhythm and time that can only come as a result of a long-term relationship with a God who hears and answers prayer.

Prayer and Church Spiritual Health

This section examines the importance of prayer for congregations and the Body of Christ. Its central claim is that corporate prayer is not simply a program offered by a church, but one of the practices through which a Christian community expresses its identity and dependence on God.

Prayer within the life of the gathered church

The Word of God shows prayer as foundational for the constitution of the Church's identity. Chapter 2 of the book of Acts of the Apostles describes the beginning of the Church of Christ. In verse 42, the Bible describes the marks of those

[28] Naomi Haynes, "Learning to Pray the Pentecostal Way: Language and Personhood on the Zambian Copperbelt," *Religion*47, no. 1 (2017): 35–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1225906.

[29] T. M. Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum, and Ronald Thisted, "The Absorption Hypothesis: Learning to Hear God in Evangelical Christianity," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 1 (2010): 66–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2009.01197.x.

who were part of the Body: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Acts 2:42 presents prayer alongside the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. The verse portrays prayer not as an isolated program but as one of the recurring practices that shaped the community's common life. The surrounding narrative describes shared resources, worship, and care for others (Acts 2:43–47). This does not mean that prayer alone caused the community's growth, but it does show that prayer belonged to the ordinary pattern of life through which the early believers expressed their faith and mutual commitment.

Other passages in Acts develop this picture. In Acts 4:23–31, believers respond to threats by gathering, praying together, recalling Scripture, and asking for boldness in witness. In Acts 12:5–12, the church prays earnestly for Peter while he is imprisoned. In Acts 13:1–3, worship, fasting, and prayer accompany communal discernment and the setting apart of Barnabas and Saul for mission. These episodes portray corporate prayer in adversity, intercession, and mission; they do not present a single program or guarantee a particular institutional outcome.

Matt 21:12–13 records Jesus' action in the Jerusalem temple and his citation of Isa 56:7: "My house will be called a house of prayer." The immediate literary and historical context is the temple, and the passage should not be treated as though "temple" were simply a synonym for the later Christian church. It contributes to the biblical understanding of prayer and worship, but the case for the importance of prayer in the church is more directly grounded in texts that describe Christian communities actually praying together, such as Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:23–31; 12:5–12; and 13:1–3.

> 18 "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
> 19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matt 18:18-20, NIV).

Jesus' description of the temple as a "house of prayer" draws on Isa 56:7, where prayer is associated with the worship of God and the inclusion of peoples beyond Israel. In Matt 21:12–13, Jesus' action in the temple criticizes the way the sacred space has been used and contrasts that use with God's purpose for it. The passage therefore contributes to a theology of prayer that is communal and

oriented toward God's purposes for worship and the nations. It does not, on its own, provide a complete account of Christian congregational prayer; rather, it places prayer within the larger questions of worship, access to God, and the community's faithfulness to God's purposes.

In 2024, the Global Church member Survey provided evidence of declining participation in local church prayer meetings within the population surveyed between 2018 and 2023.[30] In 2018, 14.5 percent of the participants in the survey had never attended a prayer meeting in their local church during the last 12 months, this number climbed to 20 percent in 2023. In the same analysis, 63 percent attended at least monthly in 2018, but, in 2023, the number decreased to 59 percent.

This survey reports a change in prayer-meeting attendance among the population surveyed. Because the findings arise from that survey's particular population and measurement, they should not be presented as a representative estimate for all Christian congregations. Nevertheless, they provide a useful prompt for asking how local churches make shared prayer accessible and formative, presenting the need to reinforce the importance of prayer for each believer.

The formative functions of corporate prayer

Corporate prayer can be understood as formative in at least four related ways. First, it gives a congregation a shared language for addressing God. Through adoration and thanksgiving, members learn to name God's character and remember grace together. Second, intercession makes the needs of others part of the community's common attention. Third, confession and prayer for one another can provide practices through which the community seeks honesty, repentance, healing, and reconciliation, provided these practices are undertaken with appropriate care and trust. Fourth, prayer can support communal discernment by bringing decisions and mission before God, as in Acts 13:1–3.

It is important to point out, however, that these functions are not automatic outcomes. A prayer meeting may be poorly facilitated, dominated by a few voices, or disconnected from the actual needs of the community. Corporate prayer becomes formative when people can participate meaningfully, when leaders model a range of biblical forms of prayer, and when the practice is connected to the congregation's shared life and mission. Its significance is therefore not measured only by the number

[30] Karl G. Bailey, *2022–2023 Global Church Member Survey* (Silver Spring, MD: Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2024).

of meetings held, but also by how prayer is integrated into the relationships and responsibilities of the church.

Research on congregational small groups offers relevant, but limited, empirical support. The US Congregational Life Survey reported that people involved in small groups devoted to prayer and Bible study develop a greater sense of belonging, more frequent attendance and higher rates of giving.[31] That resonates with James' instructions to the churches: "Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5.16 NIV). Because small groups involve multiple practices and social relationships, such findings do not isolate prayer as the cause of those outcomes. They do, however, support further attention to the ways shared religious practices and relationships are associated with congregational participation. James 5:16 supplies a specifically theological account of prayer as mutual care, while the empirical study offers a distinct kind of evidence; the two should be brought into dialogue without treating them as interchangeable.

Moreover, prayer is related to dependence on God. When writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul states that "in the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans" (Rom 8.26). This passage primarily concerns the Spirit's intercession, so it should not be used by itself as proof that congregations must pray together. Read alongside the communal practices in Acts, however, it contributes to a theology in which prayer acknowledges that the church's life and mission do not rest solely on its own capacity. Prayer expresses not only individual dependence on God, but also the dependence of the church as a community. Tim Keller affirms that "to pray is to accept that we are, and will always be, wholly dependent on God for everything."[32] A church that prays is a church that recognizes that God is sovereign and His church are dependent on Him to become the ambassadors that they are called to be (2 Cor 5:20).

Finally, prayer has often accompanied Christian renewal movements. In the book of Acts, chapter 2, the evangelist reports that when the disciples were all gathered in one place, "[2] ...a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [...] [4] All of them were filled with the

[31] Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, "A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2011): 91–111, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srq067.

[32] Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 205.

Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Acts 2.2,4; NIV). They were together and received the Holy Spirit. This moment, known as Pentecost, marked the beginning of the movement that transformed the world, beginning in Jerusalem and being impactful to the ends of the earth.

Thousands of years later, another movement received a similar name. According to Boechat, the Pentecostal explosion is one of the greatest religious phenomena of modernity, reaching 630 million people worldwide.[33] Historians, such as Cecil Robeck Jr.,[34] report that on April 12, 1906, after an entire night of prayer, William J. Seymour spoke in tongues for the first time. A couple of days later, a prayer meeting in the Azusa Street in Los Angeles would mark the beginning of the movement that would change the religious landscape of the World-South, with emphasis in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Such examples establish a historical association between prayer and particular movements of renewal; they do not prove that prayer alone caused those movements or that revival can be produced by a particular prayer strategy. A more defensible claim is that prayer has frequently been part of the practices through which Christians have sought God's guidance and responded to perceived movements of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Canadian survey findings about prayer frequency and participation raise important questions for churches. However, they do not independently measure congregational spiritual vitality or establish that changes in prayer cause changes in church health. The theological case for cultivating prayer rests more directly on scripture's portrayal of prayer as an expression of dependence on God, mutual care, discernment, and participation in the church's mission. Empirical findings provide context for the case rather than proof of a causal relationship. Because of that, every Christian has a responsibility to be aware of the challenges involving prayer as well as grow in the knowledge and practice of prayer, so as to strengthen their individual and corporate spiritual life.

Once prayer is seen as a formative ecclesial practice, churches should cultivate it as part of their ordinary shared life rather than treating it only as a ministry program

[33] John Boechat, "Functional Differentiation and Religious Modernity: A Theoretical Analysis Based on Pentecostalism in Brazil," *Sociology and Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (2018): 20–34.

[34] Cecil M. Robeck Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

or a brief element before and after other activities. The biblical and social-learning discussions above suggest several practical directions.

First, congregations can make prayer visible in regular worship. Leaders can model thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition, explaining the purpose of these practices without turning every prayer into a lesson. Second, small groups can create predictable opportunities for members to pray for one another, with attention to confidentiality, consent, and the needs of those who may be uncomfortable praying aloud. Third, churches can teach prayer through scripture and shared practice: participants can learn from the Lord's Prayer, the prayers in Acts, the Psalms, and the instructions in the epistles, then practise these forms in community. Fourth, congregations can connect prayer with discernment and mission, as the community does in Acts 13:1–3, so that prayer is not detached from decisions, service, and witness.

These recommendations should not be understood as empirically proven interventions that guarantee church growth or revival. They are practical implications suggesting that prayer practices are shaped by social learning and participation. Churches should attend to local context, invite meaningful participation, and evaluate whether their practices help members grow in shared care, dependence on God, and engagement in mission.

After all, prayer is both a personal spiritual discipline and a practice embedded in the shared life of the church. A biblical typology of adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, confession, and petition helps identify the different orientations expressed in prayer. These forms can direct attention toward God, cultivate gratitude, make others' needs part of the community's concern, encourage truthful repentance, and express dependence. Their formative significance emerges not from the categories alone but from their repeated practice within Christian discipleship.

The NT presents believers praying together in waiting, adversity, mutual care, discernment, and mission. These accounts support the argument that corporate prayer is more than a program offered by a congregation; it is one of the practices through which the church learns to live as a community before God. The empirical literature adds useful context about prayer habits and religious socialisation, but the evidence must be interpreted with care. Associations should not be confused with causal proof.

Churches have reason to cultivate corporate prayer through instruction, observation, and participation. When prayer is woven into worship, relationships, pastoral care, and mission, it can provide a shared language through which believers

express faith and responsibility for one another. Corporate prayer is not a guarantee of institutional vitality, but it is a significant practice through which Christian communities seek God together and embody their dependence on him.

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