

FURTHER REFLECTIONS



The “Prayer and Care” Mission and Missionaries

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You’ve seen it. After a church service, people come down to the front of the church for prayer. For some churches, this is a weekly pattern. Others designate a room where people can go for prayer. And churches want to be sure they pray for their missionaries when they are visiting (and, of course, when they are away!).

All this is to the good. I am all for prayer. I’ve seen some of what God can do through prayer. I realize I have much to learn about prayer.

But I thought recently: what would a new Christian think the church is all about by observing this kind of pattern? Imagine that you are in the church and see this happen week-by-week. You would be impressed that the church really *cares* for its people. In a time of need, you would go down front yourself.

A church wants its people to know that it cares for and serves the hurting. But does such a concern imply that the church is mainly about, well, ... *us* and our needs?

A by-product, in many churches, is that the *missions* conferences are really *missionary* conferences. The church wants to help the missionaries feel loved, which is OK. But missionaries have shared with me that, while they are grateful for the prayer and care, they really would like someone to *know* and *care* about their actual *work*. While we hope missionaries thrive in the midst of difficulty, they often do not sense that their support teams are in serious partnership with the work itself. That impacts their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, missionaries don’t always do a great job at effectively communicating about their work. But I wonder at times if they aren’t motivated to communicate effectively, in part, because they wonder if anyone is carefully listening.

Certainly there are elements of a healthy church that focus on its members. We are to grow in accountability in our local fellowships. We are to be devoted to the Word of God as the foundation for all truth. We’d all agree that the church is to be reaching out, sharing the love of God in Christ



with those around them. But sometimes we *look* and *act* like our main concern is ourselves.

It might be wise for each church to think again about this: What is the church in its local expression? What is its core purpose? What is it that we are trying to do when we talk about “planting” a church here or “over there?”

First, it is helpful to get out of our minds that “church” is a building or a meeting. Ephesians 3:10 suggests that the Church must be a vessel to demonstrate God’s wisdom.

Yes, leaders such as elders, pastors and teachers are to care for the flock, but look again at how the Bible describes their intended care. 1 Peter 5:1-4 talks more about oversight and leadership, emphasizing that the elders should “not lord it over” those they serve, and that they should “be examples to the flock.” Care here seems to constitute admonition and exhortation in addition to encouragement. In Acts 20:28, as Paul is about to depart, he instructs the elders to “Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock,” but the context clarifies that Paul has been announcing the whole purposes of God to this flock, and he also warns them about wolves who will come to devour.

People are praying about a wide range of concerns when they “go up front” at the end of church services. But let’s work and pray so that more believers will “go up to the altar” (at church or in their closets), imitate Acts 4:24-30, and pray for boldness in the midst of persecution and suffering, both for themselves and for their missionaries whose work they increasingly understand.

That would greatly encourage and empower missionaries—and the rest of us—to press on in the battle! Remember James 4:2b, “You do not have because you do not ask.” As John Piper put it, “Prayer causes things to happen that would not happen if you did not pray.” (You can find a link to a video quote of John Piper on my Facebook page; let me know you saw reference to this link in *MF* when you ask me to “friend” you.) f