

# **THE PASTOR AS A MAN OF PRAYER**

The subject under consideration is the pastor as a man of prayer. No one denies that the pastor is a man who has to offer many public prayers and most text books deal adequately with this subject. However, very few specifically deal with the pastor and his personal and private responsibilities in prayer, or prayer with the other leaders in the congregation. Some even do not consider the spiritual and personal aspect at all, as if the pastor's functions are all divested in public!

Because this is a subject of such supreme importance, on which true success in the ministry depends, and for which preparation must be made and guidelines set before entrance into the ministry, I have chosen to deal with this matter of prayer particularly from the angle of intercession for the flock over which he is the under-shepherd.

## 1. THE PASTOR AS A MAN OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER

### (a) Prayer: the Pastor's Peculiar Duty.

The apostles were pastors of the entire flock of God, having authority over all the churches. For them the priorities were prayer and preaching the word (Acts 6:4). It is noteworthy that they put prayer first and inseparably joined it to the ministry of the word.<sup>1</sup> Thus prayer is undoubtedly made an official duty of the pastor.

This is hardly a surprising state of affairs. The pastor has been appointed by God (Acts 20:28) and is an ambassador on behalf of God (2 Corinthians 5:20). As a steward (1 Corinthians 4:2) he is completely dependent on God as the one who must give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:5-8). Thus dependent, the only means of accomplishing the Master's will is through prayer, and then specifically through times set apart for this activity. The pastor of the sheep must pattern himself after the Great Shepherd of the sheep (John 10, Ephesians 4:11, Hebrews 13:20, 1 Peter 2:25). He intercedes for His sheep that none of them might be lost (see John 17, Hebrews 7:25). The under-shepherd will similarly be concerned for the sheep of God entrusted to him, that none of them might be lost, just as the presence of Christ before the Father makes certain the salvation for all those for whom He died. And the means appointed for this work is intercessory prayer.

What is the relationship to the other responsibilities of the pastor? In at least the following ways prayer undergirds the whole ministry and effectiveness of the pastoral office:

(1) The Pastor is an example to the flock (1 Timothy 4:12, 6:14, 1 Peter 5:3). Therefore the commands to constant prayer (cf. Romans 12:12, Ephesians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:17) must come to him all the more convictingly. He is not only subject to strong attacks of Satan on himself for his peculiarly responsible position, for the battle is against spiritual principalities and powers,<sup>2</sup> but how much the flock prays will probably be an indication of how concerned the pastor is to pray. Both call the pastor to a life of prayer.

(2) The Pastor as the minister of the word. The effectiveness of preaching is not to be found in either eloquence or man's wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:5) but in the

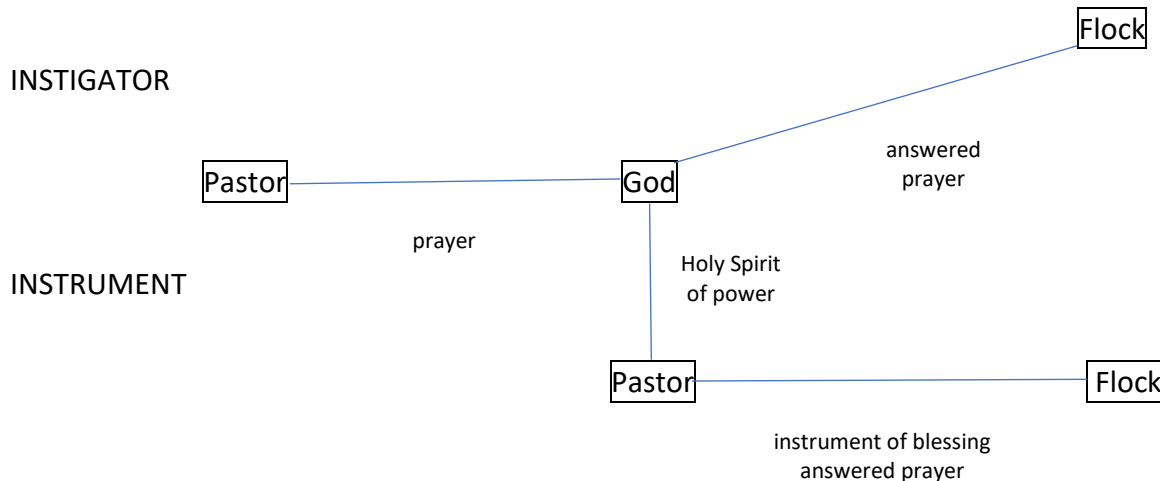
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<sup>1</sup> Bradford, Eugene *Intercessory Prayer: A Ministerial Task*, p. 3. Reprint of article in *Westminster Theological Journal* 22.1 (Nov. 1959): 13-48.

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, C. H., *Lectures to My Students*, p. 42. "He has peculiar temptations, special trials, singular difficulties ... he is led constantly to cry to the strong for strength."

accompanying power of the Holy Spirit, as the Lord is pleased to bless the preached word according to His promise (1 Thessalonians 1:5, 1 Corinthians 1:24). Thus, as is so often pointed out, the pastor must couch his preaching in prayer, before, during, and after the sermon.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, and maybe not intentionally, he is relying on the arm of the flesh. If the power is of God who alone gives the increase, the pastor must often be beseeching for the fire from heaven to descend.

(3) The Pastor as intercessor. There is only one way open for the pastor to be spiritually effective amongst his flock, that is through prayer on their behalf. He ministers in two ways as instrument and instigator, and both are, of course, inseparably connected.



Note that prayer is always the instrument that God is pleased to use.

### (b) Prayer: Scriptural Basis for Pastoral Prayer.

The apostolic ministry of prayer and preaching has already been pointed out. The Scripture and church history abound with examples.

(1) The example of Christ. The following facets can be gleaned from the Scriptures concerning the prayer habits of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

i. He spent long times in prayer, rising up very early in the morning while it was still dark (Mark 1:35), praying all night (Luke 6:12). So the writer to the Hebrews seems to join His prayers and supplications with His learning obedience (5:7). "He cried in the day-time; and in the night season there was no silence to Him."<sup>5</sup> Prayer was, therefore, an indispensable part of the Saviour's humiliation, for He did nothing except He received it from His Father (John 5:19). The disciples had obviously been struck by His prayer life and so wanted teaching concerning what they should pray for (Luke 11:1). Luke alone records this.

ii. Luke in particular emphasizes the prayer of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> He points out that Jesus always retired to pray before and during the great decisions and events of His ministry: baptism (3:21), appointment of the Twelve (6:12), Peter's confession (9:18), the transfiguration (9:28-29), Gethsemane (22:41,45 and parallels).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-47. Bridges, Charles, *Christian Ministry*, pp. 214-219.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, J. G. G. S., *The Praying Christ* (Tyndale, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> Brown, John, *Hebrews*, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, Arthur, *Christ at Prayer*.

iii. When Jesus was hemmed in by large crowds or had been exceedingly busy He never let such times crowd out His communion with His Father, but rather seems to have made a special point of withdrawing alone to pray (Matthew 14:23, Mark 6:46, Luke 5:16).

iv. His prayers were not formal and dull, but energized and real (Hebrews 5:7, cf. Luke 22:44).

(2) The example of Paul. As the apostle of all the churches, especially the Gentile churches, Paul reveals in his letters much about his prayers on their behalf.

i. He frequently prayed for all those churches and brethren who had been committed to his charge. Παντότε (Romans 1:9, Philippians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:3,11) carries the idea of always, at all times, but in connection with Paul's praying is not to be thought of as implying Paul did nothing else than to pray! It seems rather, that whenever Paul prayed his mind was turned towards those who were his peculiar responsibility in the Lord.

ii. Not only did Paul always pray for them when he prayed, but he also prayed frequently. ἀδιαλείπτως means constantly , or unceasingly (Romans 1:9, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:13, 2 Timothy 1:3) and carries the same idea as the corresponding verb παύω (παύομαι) (Ephesians 1:16, Colossians 1:9). As Paul goes on to explain in one place (2 Timothy 1:3), it was his longing "night and day". It is thus hard to imagine that a day passed in the life of the apostle Paul when he did not carry these brethren before the throne of grace in prayer.

iii. Apart from the frequency, other aspects of Paul's prayer can be noted. He felt an inner constraint to pray on behalf of the flock, so that he could not restrain from prayer (2 Thessalonians 1:3). It was more than a duty, however, for the constraint was an affectionate desire (Philippians 1:8); it was also prayer with joy (Philippians 1:4). Paul's prayers stemmed from a fatherly, nurse-like love for them (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8,11). How much this constraint had taken hold of Paul is clearly revealed when he begins to boast to the Corinthians. Apart from the physical hardships he faced there was on him "... the daily pressure ... of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). Paul took his task of shepherding the flock so seriously that it caused him mental fatigue. There can be no doubt that his anxiety was not shouldered alone, but was cast upon Christ the great burden-bearer (1 Peter 5:7).

These two Scriptural examples are enough to show that prayer is a necessary foundation for the successful ministry of any pastor. The history of the church only seems to illustrate this point further. Luther spent the three best hours of the day in communion with God. Bradford studied on his knees. Fletcher was known as a man of prayer: "His closet was his favourite retirement to which he constantly retreated, whenever his public labours allowed him a season of leisure. His public labours (astonishing as they were) bore but little proportion to those internal exercises of prayer and supplication, to which he was wholly given in private." M'Cheyne, being so anxious to give his people on the Sabbath what had cost him somewhat, never, without an urgent reason, went before them without much previous meditation and prayer. Brainerd entered in his diary: "Lord's Day, April 25. This morning spent about two hours in sacred duties, and was enabled, more than ordinarily, to agonize for immortal souls; though it was early in the morning, and the sun scarcely shone at all, yet my body was quite wet with sweat." So great was Knox's reputation that the enemies of the Protestant cause dreaded the prayers of Knox more than they feared the enemies of ten thousand men. The

testimony of Alleine's wife was that "at the time of his health he did rise constantly at or before four of the clock and would be much troubled if he heard smiths or other craftsmen at their trades before he was at communion with God." <sup>7</sup>

## 2. THE CONTENT OF PASTORAL PRAYER

There are abundant examples left to us particularly in the letters of the apostle Paul of the kind of things he prayed for those churches to whom he was writing. <sup>8</sup> Of course the contents are not exhaustive, but being usually at the introduction or beginning of the letter, they do give indications of the epitome of the desires of the apostle for them.

It is too seldom that the Scriptural examples are followed thus making it necessary here to analyze the different prayers of Paul in some detail. It has been my observation that pastors (and so also the sheep) do not couch their prayers in the language, concepts and examples of Scripture.

### (a) The Element of Thanksgiving.

"In letters written by men who were Paul's contemporaries the greeting is often followed by a statement which indicates that the person(s) addressed is being remembered in prayer to the gods." <sup>9</sup> This is true in the form of Paul's letters also, and he invariably begins with thanksgiving to God for those to whom he is writing (Romans 1:8, 1 Corinthians 1:4, Ephesians 1:16, Philippians 1:3-5, Colossians 1:3-4, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:13, 3:9, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:13, 2 Timothy 1:3). It should be noted that he thanks God for what He has done in their lives. Particularly Paul notes the grace given them in Christ which produces such fruit of faith, love, and hope and the way it is being caused to grow. Paul notes how such things are viewed by outsiders so that it is like preaching the message of the gospel itself (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:8) and in that the Lord is glorified (2 Thessalonians 1:12). The very remembrance of them, just because he loves them, also causes thanksgiving. Clearly then, the pastor must begin by giving thanks to the Lord for the way that He is working amongst the sheep.

### (b) The Element of Petition.

Matthew 9:38, Ephesians 1:17-19, 3:16-19, Philippians 1:9-11, Colossians 1:9-12, 2:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12.

In intercession the emphasis is all too often put on the material, physical aspect. Clearly this is a part of prayer, but Paul's burden is undoubtedly in the realm of sanctification, attaining that perfection of Christ-likeness. The circumstances that the Lord brings must always be viewed in this light (Hebrews 12:11). Paul so desperately wanted to see these Thessalonians face to face, but not as an end in itself, so that what was lacking in their faith might be supplied (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Again he urged prayer for all men, and especially for those in positions of authority, "... that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (1 Timothy 2:2).

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<sup>7</sup> Bridges, op. cit., pp. 147,150,151. Spurgeon, op. cit., pp. 44-48.

<sup>8</sup> Pink, Arthur W., *The Prayers of Paul*.

<sup>9</sup> Hendriksen, William, *1-2 Thessalonians*, p. 45.

Having given thanks for the fruit of the Spirit already evident in the lives of believers he prays that that fruit might abound (Philippians 1:11, Colossians 1:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:11). Paul knows that knowledge and wisdom that only the Holy Spirit can give are necessary for such growth in grace and so to be pleasing to the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:12) he prays for its impartation (Ephesians 1:17-18, 3:18-19, Philippians 1:9b-10, Colossians 1:9, 2:2). When he ponders the temptations and trials which surely come to every Christian, he knows what need they have of being strengthened that they might be patient and abounding still in thanksgiving (Ephesians 3:16, Colossians 1:11-12a). He puts great emphasis also on love, Christ's love in the believer's heart (Ephesians 3:17), and love towards one another as believers (Philippians 1:9, Colossians 2:2).

Another element is brought to the fore when the apostle seeks the prayer support of those to whom he ministers, that as God's will is done in his life, so the word of God might go forth in power and effectually accomplish all that God purposes (Romans 15:30-32, 2 Corinthians 1:11, Ephesians 6:19-20, Philippians 1:19, Colossians 4:3-4, 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, Hebrews 13:18-19).

One final element of petition is something given to His disciples by the Lord (Matthew 9:38). It is particularly those who are already engaged in the ministry of shepherding (or as Christ changes the metaphor to harvesting) that they pray the Lord for more workers.

### (c) Conclusions.

1. The precise interests in pastoral prayer. As for the flock over which the pastor has immediate concern, he should focus his prayers (and thus all he does) on the growth of the people into the pure image of Christ (Philippians 1:10) that they might be ready for that Day. Prayer for individual sermons, circumstances, and the like, should all be conceived in this rubric. In the words of Paul, the pastor should be "... in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).
2. The breadth of pastoral prayer. The pastor can never be satisfied with just praying for his own flock. He must be concerned for the advance of the gospel, perhaps by the Lord separating some from his own congregation to this work. He has an interest too in those things with which his people are concerned: the outreach they have in a special community, the missionaries with whom they have a special involvement, conditions in the country or world which can so easily affect the people of God through the mass media. He is to keep watch over their souls in all these matters as one who must give an account (Hebrews 13:17).
3. The importance of pastoral prayer. This work cannot thus be accomplished in a few moments. It is the heart of the work of the pastor (not perhaps in terms of minutes and hours), thus he must devote himself to it (Acts 6:4).

## 3. THE PROBLEMS IN PASTORAL PRAYER

Having identified theoretically what the Scripture framework is, it is obvious that not often is the pattern upheld in the lives of pastors. It will now be necessary to identify some of the more important problems and the reasons why they are especial problems today, to prepare for the last section of a positive practical concern. It needs to be emphasized again, that as the Master was the special target for the attacks of the evil one (Matthew 4:1,11) so it will be

for those who follow in His footsteps, especially the under-shepherds (cf. John 15:18-21). God has given pastors to the church (amongst other gifts) that together the whole flock might become mature, like their Lord, and thus, by implication, further removed from succumbing to Satan's temptations (Ephesians 4:11-14). What are some of the temptations that Satan loves to put in the way of pastors of God's sheep?

#### (i) Preoccupation with Other Legitimate Tasks.

With the ease of transportation and communication in this technological age it is easy for the pastor to become so absorbed in his ministry that he does not give himself time to pray.<sup>10</sup> The larger the congregation the more this tends to be so, unless his responsibilities are unusually clearly defined.<sup>11</sup> Henry Martyn wrote after one year in the ministry: "The want of private devotional reading and shortness of prayer, through incessant sermon-making, had produced much strangeness between God and his own soul."<sup>12</sup> Such a pastor should probably aim to stick more strictly to his schedule, and most certainly have an effective means of warding off unnecessary interruptions, such as having his secretary or wife intercept telephone calls and visitors. Of course, he must be wise in the planning of his schedule, leaving adequate time to pray at a time when he is least likely to be disturbed. Some pastors find they have to resort to taking the phone off the hook or turning down the bell and smothering the noise with a cushion! One of the greatest advantages of the eldership, in its plurality (aside from the fact that it is Scriptural, Acts 14:23), is that referrals can be made in cases of urgency if one of the elders-pastors is otherwise engaged. However, complete separation of ministries amongst different pastors is certainly not recommended. This then, is an area where a great deal of personal discipline has to be exercised, and it can only be done by God's grace.

#### (ii) Spiritual Lethargy.

It is an understatement to say that prayer is not an easy task which is always enjoyed by the participant. There is no Christian who at one time or another, more or less frequently, does not find it difficult to pray. He is tired, physically and perhaps even spiritually; he has little desire to do so, except he knows he must; he has no definite conceptions concerning the things he should pray for. These factors, and many more, might be problems for the pastor in his work of intercessory prayer. Once again, the importance of planning, organization and the schedule, that is, definite goals and aims, is paramount. If these things have been considered before the Lord then they will provide the added incentive when the going gets rough. Prayer is engaging in a spiritual battle, and like all battles there are hardships to be faced. The admonitions of Paul to Timothy could as well be applied in this area as any other, as he emphasizes the effort involved in fighting the fight and running the race (2 Timothy 2:3-6). The particular remedies to rectifying lethargy will be left to the next and final section.

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<sup>10</sup> Bradford, op. cit., pp. 32ff.

<sup>11</sup> This shows the importance of properly evaluating the key text, Acts 6:4.

<sup>12</sup> Bridges, op. cit., p. 150.

### (iii) Conclusion.

By way of conclusion to the problems involved in intercessory prayer, the pastor who has seen the fundamental importance of being so engaged in his ministry, will strive to overcome all the temptations that Satan brings to seek to render him ineffective. And the pastor who does not care for his sheep by committing them in all their needs to the Great Shepherd, and who does not live in the atmosphere of communion with his Lord as he seeks to feed God's flock from the word of God, will be ineffective. This fact alone should be an encouragement to "... lift your drooping heads and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet ..." (Hebrews 12:12-13a).

## 4. THE PRACTICE OF PASTORAL PRAYER

To this last section will be confined the more practical observations of how to be a pastor who practices intercessory prayer.

### (a) The Schedule.

That the pastor must have a clearly defined and formulated schedule has already been shown. What times should the pastor specifically reserve for prayer? While there are no set times which can be laid down, the following principles should be adhered to. Since prayer is such an important part of the work of the pastor it should occupy an important place in the schedule. The following questions should at least be asked. What are the times of least interruption? When am I best able to give myself to the word and prayer? In these days when people tend to arise late and when the afternoons and evenings are the times of most activity, the time that will suit most pastors will be in the morning. At this point the example of Christ which few seem to follow these days, as Alleine regularly did, of rising well before day-break (Mark 1:35) should not be forgotten. Admittedly there is nothing more commendable in praying at this time than at any other, but the principle of meeting early with the Lord is not without Scriptural precedent (Psalm 57:8, 108:20).

### (b) The Extent.

Intercessory prayer is not something to be hurried over in a few moments, although that will often be the temptation. As the apostles inseparably linked together prayer and preaching in their ministries, the one is as important as the other. Thus time must be given to the activity of prayer. There are at least four ways in which the pastor will engage in intercessory prayer.

- i. As part of his own prayer life the pastor will pray concerning his life and ministry and for those to whom he ministers in one way or another. Since the pastor is first and foremost a Christian he must not neglect to cultivate his own soul. Thus a case could be made out that daily the pastor should set forth sufficient time for specifically intercessory prayer apart from his own devotions. Whatever the decision care must be taken that intercession is not left to the end and thus usually neglected.
- ii. During family devotions he will seek to involve his family in prayer for the church, missionaries and other needs pertaining to the kingdom of God.
- iii. Prayer will specifically be made with other elder-pastors in the church (where there is a plurality of elders) or at least with the deacons (board of the church). These should be times



of sharing needs and observations and then of thanksgiving and petition in prayer. In one church the pastors meet three times a week for an hour, during which time they are able to pray for all the members and all the different ministries of the church. Much of the responsibility of intercessory prayer can be taken up in this way, as group prayer is always an encouragement against spiritual lethargy.

iv. Scripture would also seem to give encouragement for special seasons of prayer, a factor which is neglected today, probably because of the increased pace of life. Perhaps, however, this is an added reason for engaging in such special times. It has already been seen that it was the practice of the Saviour especially before making great decisions (e.g. Luke 6:12), or before great events (Luke 9:28-29). In one particular case of a boy possessed by a dumb spirit, when the disciples were unable to cast it out, Jesus remarked that cases like this could not be dealt with except by prayer (Mark 9:29). Calvin's comments are worth noting: "When He says that this kind of devil cannot be cast out in any other way than by prayer and fasting, He means that when Satan has taken deep root in anyone, and has been confirmed by long possession, or when he rages with unbridled fury, the victory is difficult and painful, and there the contest must be maintained with all our might."<sup>13</sup> There are going to be times when very important decisions have to be made (cf. Acts 13:2, 14:23) or when there are peculiar oppositions of Satan, when prayer to the Lord should be more extended. That it was often associated with fasting shows the length of time the apostles and the early church were prepared to devote to the practice of prayer.<sup>14</sup>

### (c) The Method.

When the content of intercessory prayer was discussed the following concerns were seen to be relevant: the individuals of the flock, the ministries of the congregation, evangelism in the local and world-wide contexts particularly those in which the congregation has an interest, and the political and social conditions as they affect the people of God. How can the pastor best be organized that he acquits himself of these areas of responsibility in prayer? Some make prayer lists so that they pray for everything at least once in a week, but for some this could lead to bondage and too much formality. An alternative which would allow for more freedom would be to have separate 3 x 5 cards on which individuals and separate ministries are listed and added to as new things come to light. The great pastor of China, John Sung, used to have a photograph of all those for whom he prayed with the specific requests below, and he used to check off when these prayers had been answered. Since prayer is essentially communion with God, care must be taken to avoid being caught up in the system devised, but this does not imply that any organization is wrong. The Lord surely expects us to use our minds as much in preparation for prayer as in it. Our preparation for ministering the word is no different.

### (d) The Support.

Very noticeable are the repeated requests of the apostle Paul to his congregations that they also pray for him. How much the Lord has transformed and blessed the pastor of the flock through the faithful prayers of the people of God will never exactly be known, but it must be

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin, John, *Commentaries*, 7, *The Gospels*, p. 354.

<sup>14</sup> Spurgeon, C. H., *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

great. The relevant texts have already been listed <sup>15</sup> and that they occur in most of the letters shows how much Paul valued the prayers of the saints. The pastor can make his needs known in the prayer meeting, on the church bulletin, and over the telephone, as well as in individual conversations.

#### (e) The Preparation.

It has been well remarked many times that the very fact of the entrance into the pastorate never changed a man spiritually. As he was at seminary, so as a pastor. Prayerless in the seminary, prayerless as a pastor. How best can a student prepare for this aspect of his future work? What should the local church and seminary be doing to cultivate this attitude? If the student cannot learn to set aside time for prayer with only having studies to do, what guarantee is there he will when the demands of the pastoral office are on his shoulders? If he does not care enough to pray for the people of God now, why should he when under-shepherd of the flock? The pastor of the congregation where he is a member should make sure he is a man of prayer just as much that he has the gifts to preach. The seminary should not just concentrate on intellectual studies but as far as possible encourage the men to pray, at least setting the examples and preaching about it. Should a man qualify to be a pastor of God's flock if he is not already a man of prayer? "Is it right to take for granted, when a minister is ordained, that he will always feel it his official duty to engage in intercessory prayer? Would it not be legitimate that his attention be called to Acts 6:4 and to the example of Paul and others who excelled in this exercise? We lay great stress on orthodox and courageous preaching. We emphasize faithful catechizing. But we simply take it for granted that ministers will always pray. This might have been warranted in other days. But there is abundant reason to suggest that they do not pray as they should." <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Page 6, see also 1 Thessalonians 5:25.

<sup>16</sup> Bradford, *op. cit.*, p. 32.