

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Schofield, C. (1997). Linking Prayer And Bold Proclamation: An Exegetical Study Of Acts 4:23-31 And Ephesians 6:18-20 With Implications For Contemporary Church Growth. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 8(1), 65-78. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol8/iss1/5>

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**Linking Prayer And Bold Proclamation:
An Exegetical Study Of Acts 4:23-31 And Ephesians 6:18-20
With Implications For Contemporary Church Growth**

Chris Schofield

Introduction

E. M. Bounds once said "Prayer does not stand alone. It is not an isolated duty or an independent principle. It lives in fellowship with other Christian duties. It is married to other principles and is a partner with other graces."¹ What Bounds is suggesting is that prayer is intricately related to the totality of church life. This statement is especially true regarding evangelism and church growth.

Thom Rainer, dean of The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, gathered data from 576 churches for his book *Effective Evangelistic Churches*.² In the survey, he discovered that the churches that were growing (i.e., with regard to conversion growth) were basically doing three things--preaching, praying, and and teaching evangelistically.³ In other words, they were interfacing evangelistic praying with evangelistic proclamation--both in their Sunday schools and from their pulpits. The study demonstrates that growing churches take seriously the importance of linking prayer with their efforts in proclamation evangelism.

What is found to be the case in recent church growth surveys is founded on New Testament principles. This article examines the biblical interfacing of prayer with proclamation evangelism. In particular, I argue that bold evangelistic preaching, vital

as it is to growing churches, is only possible when preachers and churches link prayer with the same.

In short, this article demonstrates the biblical precedent for the interfacing of prayer with bold proclamation of the gospel. In a society increasingly hostile to the gospel, prayer looms large as an effective instrument to be linked with the proclamation of the gospel. Tom Wright has argued that America is steadily becoming more like the pagan world of the Apostolic era.⁴ Hence, the need for a New Testament approach and understanding of how the early church boldly proclaimed the good news of Christ to a pagan culture.

A New Testament Example (Acts 4: 23-31)

In the Southern Baptist Convention about 75% of churches are plateaued or declining; the figure is even higher when churches of all traditions are considered. Andrew Murray comments, "Most churches think their members gather simply to take care of and edify each other. They don't know that God rules the world by the prayers of his saints, that prayer is the power by which Satan is conquered and that through prayer the church on earth has access to the powers of the heavenly world."⁵ If Murray is correct in his assessment, and I believe he is, then much can be learned from the New Testament church with regard to the interfacing of prayer and bold proclamation of the gospel.

Notice how the church at Jerusalem interfaces prayer with bold proclamation in Acts 4: 23-31:

And being let go, they went to their companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.' For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now Lord, look

on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.⁶

The immediate context is important in understanding this link. Peter was in the middle of his second great sermon (see Acts 3:11-26) when the religious leaders and temple guards came and dragged John and him away to jail (Acts 4:1-4). The next day Peter and John were on trial and Peter began to preach again to the Council (Acts 4:5-12). Then, in verse 13 the Scripture says that the Council observed their "confidence." The word for "confidence" is *parrhesia* and can mean boldness, courage, openness, freedom in speaking. It can also mean free and fearless confidence in speech.⁷

This boldness astounded the Council, because they were uneducated and common men. But, even so, they were compelled to speak of what they had seen and heard (see 4:20) because "they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Marrow suggests that an underlying prophetic compulsion similar to that described by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 20:7-9 may be behind their *parrhesia*.⁸ This may be true in part, but one thing is for certain, their likeness to their Master was undeniable. The key factor in this is that they had been with Christ, which in turn gave them confidence to preach. F.F. Bruce fittingly speaks to this when he says:

Peter and John were obviously unversed in the formal learning of the rabbinical schools, yet they spoke with a freedom and forthrightness that impressed their judges. How could untrained laymen like these so ably sustain a theological disputation with members of the supreme court? . . . They had been companions with Jesus . . . [and] People had expressed the same surprise about him. . . . No one could match him in his sure handling of the scriptures, his unerring ability to go back to first principles for the confirming of his own teaching and the discomfiture of his opponents. And he had plainly im-

parted something of that same gift to his disciples. Not only so, he had supported his teaching with the mighty works which he performed; now Peter and John were doing the same.⁹

In verses 14-22 we found the account of the Council ordering Peter and John to stop speaking the word of God in the city. In response, they gathered with the brethren and reported all that had transpired (vs. 23). Then they gathered together and lifted their voices heavenward in prayer (vs. 24). It is noteworthy that prayer was their first response to the persecution they were facing. It is also noteworthy that the word in verse 24 for "Lord" is from *despotes* (i.e., lord over, master) rather than the usual *kurios*. They knew the sovereign Lord was in control and would make a way. They believed He would work in direct response to their prayers. Prayer was a priority in the life and ministry of Christ (Mark 1:35; Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 6:12; 22:39; John 17), and the same was true of the apostles (Acts 2:42).

Prayer should be a priority in the life of the contemporary witness and preacher. David Larson, Professor of Homiletics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School spoke to the priority that prayer should play in the life of God's messenger when he said, "We have not prepared until we have prayed. . . . We cannot represent God if we have not stood before God. It is more important for me therefore to teach a student to pray than to preach."¹⁰ The Apostles made prayer their first response because they knew that "No age, no person, will demonstrate the gospel-power except the ages or persons of deep and earnest prayer. A prayerless age will have only scant models of divine power."¹¹

Verses 24-30 record their prayer. This prayer has Old Testament parallels and can be tied to Isaiah 37:15-20. But, it breaks away from Isaiah in verse 29, where instead of praying for revenge on their oppressors, the believers ask for the Lord to grant them boldness (*parrhesia*) to preach the gospel in the midst of opposition.¹²

Verses 25b-26 are quoted from Psalm 2, which is a Messianic Psalm and along with verses 27-28 seek to concentrate on God's sovereignty and Christ's victory. In this part of their prayer the theme is this: "All the plotting against God's anointed is in vain because God has already predetermined the outcome (cf. 2:23; 3:18). In the paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty,

despite all the ragging of humanity, God's purposes prevail. This was the case in Christ and with the apostles before the Sanhedrin."¹³

At this point one comes to the focal verses that demonstrate the interfacing of prayer with bold proclamation. In verse 29 the apostles move to the major thrust of their prayer. They begin to petition the Lord with specific requests. The first is for the Lord to consider the threats of the Sanhedrin. The word "consider" is an imperative of entreaty and has the force of an urgent and intense request. The second request is for the Lord to "grant" them "boldness" to speak His word in the face of perils and threats that had arisen.

This prayer for "boldness" (from *parrhesia*), which has already been associated with the apostolic witness in 4:13, is significant in at least two ways. First, notice that the apostles are not seeking revenge or the end of the opposition but rather courage and freedom of speech.¹⁴ Second, they were seeking this boldness so that they might proclaim the gospel. Their interest was not in their own safety nor was it in self-propagation, but rather it lay in the eternal redemptive purposes of God. Their desire was simply for the Lord to empower them with a liberty and openness so that they might share the gospel effectively. Their motive was centered on God's redemptive work. This too should be one's motive in seeking bold proclamation for church growth. It is only in this kind of sincere motive that the Lord will grant boldness of speech.

A third request found in vs. 29-30 is for signs and wonders to accompany this bold proclamation of the gospel. Polhill reminds us that miracles in the book of Acts "are always in the service of the word."¹⁵ He continues, "they are 'signs' in the sense that they point beyond themselves to the ultimate power of the gospel message of Christ's resurrection and the salvation that is in him (4:12)."¹⁶ In other words, the apostles were not seeking accompanying miracles and signs so they could flaunt their power and be delivered from their present persecution. Rather, they desired to have accompanying miracles in order that the word would be under girded by the miracles, bringing more boldness to their witness.¹⁷

Verse 31 records the glorious answer to their threefold requests. "Prayed" is from *deomai* and is most appropriate here. It is a culminative aorist and would refer to action that is completed.

From this, one can see that they had prayed *through* their situation. They had *finished* praying (II Chron. 7:1-14), having acquired their petitions from a gracious God.

Deomai is generally used in the New Testament to refer to specific need-based prayer, hence the reasoning behind its usage here. The prayer the apostles prayed was in fact very specific and was certainly based on an immediate need. The place was "shaken" and they were all "filled," with the Spirit. To be "filled" with the Spirit refers to a special moment in which the believer is endowed with a special presence or saturation of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note that "filled" (*eplesthesan*) and its derivatives are primarily Lukan with only two of its twenty-four usages being outside Luke-Acts.¹⁸ The word group has two main uses. The first refers to one being full of the Spirit as was Christ (Luke 4:1); the first deacons (Acts 6); Stephen (Acts 7:55); and Barnabas (Acts 11:24). To be full of the Holy Spirit is to be "habitually governed and controlled by the Lord the Spirit, just as Jesus was."¹⁹

The second main use of *eplesthesan* and its derivatives is seen in this passage; that of a sudden, special filling or anointing. Green agrees that this second use does not refer to the "settled characteristics of a lifetime but to the sudden inspiration of a moment."²⁰ This special "anointing" or "filling" happened in the life of John the Baptist, while he was still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15); in the life of Jesus (Luke 4:18); with the apostles at Pentecost (which was the first initial filling that allowed the Holy Spirit to begin to dwell in their lives in a permanent way, Acts 2:1-11); with Peter, for the express purpose of power in witness (Acts 4:8); in the life of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:17;13:9) and in the present passage being considered (Acts 4:31).²¹

It is worth noting, that the special filling being spoken of here and throughout Luke-Acts, "does not call into question the permanence of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost."²² Rather, it represents a special filling for a special opportunity.

Therefore, one can surmise that Christians should live their daily lives in the fullness of the Spirit which was received at their initiation into the kingdom, or their conversion experience. But, Christians can also look for those occasional special fillings of the Spirit when the Spirit will come upon them to anoint them with unction and ability to fulfill a particular God-sized task that is

within the realm of the redemptive purposes of God.²³

This special saturation of the Spirit came upon them while they were in community prayer (4:31). They were not praying for a filling of the Spirit, neither were they praying for an experience or "the feeling of the Spirit." They were simply praying for the Sovereign Lord of the universe to give them spiritual power to preach boldly amidst opposition. The Apostles knew all too well that "all attempts to witness to the gospel are bound to fail without the invigorating power of the Holy Spirit."²⁴ Therefore, they prayed, trusting the same Spirit that had filled them at Pentecost, to give them unction for this special task.

Following their "filling" by the Spirit, they then began to preach with "boldness." As noted above this refers to unhindered, open speech, or preaching. In Acts, the word used here, *parrhesia*, in both its noun and verb forms, "becomes the mark of those who preach the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ 'quite openly and unhindered' "(Acts 28:31).²⁵ Also, this open, unhindered, and "forthright proclamation of the gospel is God's gift and not an attribute of human personality."²⁶ In this context, the filling of the Spirit is God's underlying gift, and therefore the source of the *parrhesia*.

Haenchen said it well: "It is the Holy Spirit which bestows the fearlessness with which the Christian message is proclaimed in the face of danger."²⁷ Thus, in the New Testament, and primarily in Luke-Acts one can conclude that the Spirit is inseparably linked with the messenger's ability to proclaim under the divinely given *parrhesia*.

Not only is the divinely given *parrhesia* inseparably linked with the filling of the Holy Spirit, it is also inseparably linked with the "very nature of the message proclaimed 'in the name of the Lord.' " They boldly proclaimed not their own philosophies but, as the Scripture testifies, they "spoke the word of the Lord." As the divine *parrhesia* is given, so is the message to be proclaimed.

The Apostles did not have to wait long for the Lord to answer their prayer for boldness. He thus granted them liberty to preach amidst opposition. He also granted them the message to be proclaimed. They would be persecuted, but in their persecution, the Lord's power and authority would be demonstrated through bold proclamation. He also demonstrated His power and lovingkindness by answering speedily and by answering in

a tangible way (i.e. shaking of building, which is a direct answer to the prayer for signs and wonders).

In summary, this passage demonstrates the biblical linkage of prayer with bold proclamation in several ways. First, by the example of the Apostles, one can see the priority of prayer in bold proclamation. They, when faced with the command to stop preaching the gospel, turned to the Lord in prayer (vs. 24). Second, it shows one that prayer plays an integral role in God's messengers being given divine *parrhesia*. Thirdly, this passage certainly demonstrates the fact that the Holy Spirit is the underlying source of the divinely given *parrhesia*.

Finally, this passage not only marks the beginning of the church's response to persecution, but it shows how the early church sought to rise to the occasion of the day and proclaim the glad tidings in an unhindered way to the multitudes. This boldness continued throughout the remainder of their ministries (see 9:27-28;14:3; 19:8; 18:26; and 28:31), resulting in phenomenal church growth (Acts 2:41,47).

Paul's Instruction for Believers to Pray for Bold Proclamation (Eph. 6:18-20)

The second text examined in this link is Ephesians 6:18-20. Whereas the Acts narrative gives a live example of the interfacing of prayer and bold proclamation, this passage is significant because it records Paul's instruction to believers for them to pray for him to have the divinely given *parrhesia* in his proclamation of the gospel. Thus, the linkage is demonstrated both in narrative and propositional passages. The latter is seen in the following passage:

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints--and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

This epistle begins with prayer and ends with prayer (Eph. 1:15-21). This passage is contained within a broader passage where Paul is teaching on the warfare of Spirit-filled believers (6:10-20). In this immediate context Paul is showing that prayer is

not merely some afterthought that is to be tacked on at the end of a portion of *didache*, but rather it is an "indispensable auxiliary" of the Christian soldier.²⁸ Prayer is to be linked with all aspects of the Christian's armour that is to be "put on" for his battle against the forces of hell (6: 10-17). Bruce sees this prayer passage as being an instance where Paul "passes from metaphor to the literal language of the spiritual conflict."²⁹ In verses 18-20, Paul is in essence showing how the sword of the Spirit--the Word of God is to function.³⁰

To Paul, prayer includes conflict with the forces of evil in the most literal sense. In this prayer he begins by exhorting believers to "pray always," a call to unceasing prayer (I Thess. 5:17). This constancy and habitual prayer flows out of the natural life where prayer has become a part of one's everyday life.³¹ This "unceasing prayer" is to include both prayer in general and specific need-based prayer. It is also to be accomplished "in the Spirit." This is important in part because the Spirit is given as Helper (Rom. 8:26-28). But to pray "in the Spirit" means more than to pray with the Spirit's help. It also means to pray in the Spirit's power as it relates to the agency of God.³²

Foulkes says that "the Spirit is the atmosphere of the Christian's life, and as he lives in the Spirit grace will be given to watch and power to continue in prayer."³³ Basically, one can say that to pray "in the Spirit" is to pray in the presence, control, help, influence, and power of God's Spirit. Paul instructs the believers to pray "in the Spirit" so that their prayers will have effect with God. He knows that as they pray in God's Spirit they will then pray under the help and influence of God, the One who initiates prayer. "Indeed, the whole secret of prayer is found in these three words, 'in the Spirit.' God the Father answers prayer that God the Holy Spirit inspires."³⁴

This prayer in the Spirit is for "all the saints." It is also for the Apostle Paul (for me). As Stott explains, "he was wise enough to know his own need of strength if he was to stand against the enemy, and humble enough to ask his friends to pray with him and for him."³⁵ Many a pulpit is dry and dull because many a preacher is unwilling to humble themselves before God and man and seek the prayers of God's people for the work of ministry he has been called to do. The saying that "God always equips His people to do what He calls them to do" is no truer than as it re-

lates to the subject at hand. Part of the preacher's equipping lies in the prayers of God's people. This Paul knew very well for, his writings are permeated with requests for prayer (Col. 4:3; Rom. 15:30-32; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1-2).

Paul first asks the believers to pray for "utterance" to be given him. This would represent clarity of speech. Second, he desires that they pray for him to be enabled to "open his mouth boldly." Here again is the word *parrhesia* which for the most part in Paul, best illustrates the threefold Christian usage of the word in the New Testament. In Paul one sees it meaning: openness towards God (2 Cor. 3: 14, in the lifting of the veil), openness toward men (Phlm 8-9), and openness or unhindered speech in the proclamation of the gospel (Eph. 6:18-20).³⁶ The noun form is used in verse 19 and the verbal form *parrhesiasomai* (I may speak boldly) is used in verse 20. In both instances, open and unhindered speech is linked with clarity of speech. This whole request for prayer is wrapped around two rudimentary needs in the effective proclamation or witness of the gospel. That of a need for clarity of speech and courage in speech.³⁷

It is important to remember the historical context of the writing of this epistle. Paul was in prison in Rome at the letter's writing and was possibly looking for an opportunity to appear before the imperial court; nevertheless, he was looking at the day by day opportunities that afforded themselves for witnessing to the guards who were constantly in his presence.

Paul was desiring the unction and power to proclaim with clarity of speech God's word day by day.³⁸ This unction is the salve that would smooth the tongue for the word of the Lord to flow in an unhindered way from God's messenger to his audience. This *parrhesia*, as E. M. Bounds reminds us, "comes directly from God in answer to prayer. Only praying hearts are filled with this holy oil. Only praying lips are anointed with this divine unction. Prayer, much prayer, is the price of preaching unction."³⁹

In these short verses, Paul is instructing his fellow laborers to pray for God's presence in his proclamation of the gospel. This is significant as E. M. Bounds points out: "Anointing on the preacher puts God in the gospel. Without the anointing [*parrhesia*], God is absent, and the gospel is left to the low and unsatisfactory forces that the ingenuity, interest, or talents of men can devise to enforce and project its doctrines."⁴⁰ Paul desired to be

an instrument in his Father's hands (Rom.9:18-24). According to Luke, that is what transpired in Paul's ministry (see Acts 28:20).

Therefore, in view of the above discussion it can be concluded that when Paul requested that believers pray for him to have bold and unhindered speech while in prison, he was in actuality asking them to: (1) pray in the help, power and influence of God's Spirit; (2) pray that he would be endowed with the divine *parrhesia*, which would grant him courage and anointing in his speech; and (3) pray that God would be in Paul's attempts to witness while in prison. Through this examination, it has been demonstrated once again the inseparable link between prayer and bold proclamation of the gospel to the unbelieving.

Conclusion

In the above examination of Acts 4: 23-31 and Ephesians 6:18-20 it has been shown that biblically speaking, prayer and bold proclamation are interfaced. Also, from this study several salient truths arise regarding the biblical linkage of prayer and bold proclamation as they relate to contemporary church growth. Hopefully, these truths will encourage and help one to assimilate the above material in one's life and ministry. They are as follows:

1. There is an inseparable link between prayer, obedience to God's will, and bold proclamation of the good news.
2. It is evident that God's Spirit and His presence is absolutely essential for bold proclamation or divinely given *parrhesia* to take place.
3. Believers need to be instructed to pray that *parrhesia* would indeed be a part of their sharing of the gospel.
4. Divinely given *parrhesia* is both an individual and corporate phenomenon. For, divinely given *parrhesia* comes in direct answer to the prayers of God's people.
5. Finally, these passages help to demonstrate the truth that bold proclamation of the gospel, undergirded with the intercession of the saints, is a mighty tool to effect church growth in any age.

The question remains: Will the church of the coming millennium follow this biblical precedent and experience phenomenal growth? Only if they decide to follow the biblical pattern of linking prayer with bold proclamation of the gospel. I conclude with a reminder to myself and all who seek to lead believers and

churches to proclaim Christ to the unconverted masses:

That Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees, that being true, why not make him tremble? Why not storm the very gates of hell? Nothing could please God more. In the conflict that is upon us, certainly we can ill afford to neglect the one weapon Satan does not have in his arsenal and the one he fears the most--prayer.⁴¹

Prayer, evangelism, and church growth are three peas in the same gospel pod.

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3. *Ibid.*, 11-17.

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