TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF

STRATEGIC INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Implications for Mission Advancement

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It appears that conventional missiology and practice in conservative evangelical circles does not focus on or implement strategic intercessory prayer as the primary tool for gospel penetration.

If this is the case, why is it? This paper will suggest reasons for this statement. As well, steps in researching Basis and Meta theoretical material concerning strategic intercessory prayer will be discussed: pointing to the ultimate goal of proposing a replicable model that could integrate Biblical, historical, missiological and current best practices for mission advancement.

Notably, a search of the Yale University Library database reveals that, since 1900, only ten missiology doctoral dissertations out of 1,500 have addressed the subject in various forms (2014). While Lausanne 2004 included relationship between prayer and evangelism, it appeared to be an anomaly. The *Evangelical Missionary Quarterly*, a professional missions journal that serves the worldwide missions community, published seven articles that dealt with prayer of any manner since 1964, with the last being in 2014. Only two of these were linked to mission strategy (Bryant, 1987; Bacon, 2014). Why is this the case? What is it about modern missiological theory and praxis that causes a seeming dearth in the study and practice of strategic intercessory prayer?

This lack of research and publication concerning strategic intercessory prayer is even more striking when one reviews the amount of material in missiological journals concerning contextualization. The number of articles on contextualization has more than doubled every ten years since 1961 (Nehrbass, 2013:3). It appears little has changed since John Robb noted that the library at Fuller Theological Seminary, the school that grants more missiology doctorates than any other, had no book specifically on prayer and frontier missions, with only passing references to prayer in books on the history and theology of missions. Meanwhile, holdings on mission strategy, organization and planning abounded (Robb, 1991:24).

This may be problematic because it appears that:

1.1 Jesus seemed to model intercessory prayer before kingdom advancement.

Jesus prayed in John 17:20 for those who did not know him yet (Bible, 1984). In addition, he prayed in John 5:17, 19 for disciples to be in communion with where the Father was working (Bible, 1984). Furthermore, he prayed in Luke 22:31-32 for a key leader not to fail (Bible, 1984). Notably, Matthew 9:35-39 records that Jesus noticed the harvest was 'white' and then *instructed* prayer for the Lord of the harvest to send labourers (Bible, 1984). The intense struggle of Gethsemane has much to teach us about intercessory prayer, as found in Matthew 26:36-46 (Bible, 1984).

1.2 Missions work without the guidance of intercessory prayer could seemingly be outside the sovereignty and blessing of God.

According to the Lausanne-Cape Town Strategy for Evangelism in the 21st century, no amount of planning or organization will surpass what only God can do (Eshleman, 2010:12). *Not* integrating evangelism with intercessory prayer has resulted in the failure of many well intentioned evangelistic efforts. In Acts 16:6-10 (Bible, 1984), we see the Apostle Paul twice taking the initiative to go to Asia, but twice being rebuffed. In Numbers 14:42 in the Old Testament (Bible, 1984), we see an example from Jewish history of the folly of seeking to work without God's blessing.

1.3 Missions work has seemingly made significant advances – equally true during times of nonrevival and revival – fuelled by strategic intercessory prayer before and during missions' activity.

The Moravians initiated and sustained intercessory prayer for missions that lasted 100 years and launched a mission movement. Amazingly, during times of persecution and political turbulence, the China Inland Mission saw strong growth with a major focus on intercessory prayer (Fung, 2008:338).

In analyzing the "Great Awakening" revival of 1757-1758, David Prothero (2005:199) noted that the movement began and was developed through intercessory prayer. Prothero categorized it as a movement of the Spirit. This confirms what J. Edwin Orr stated: that the Second Great Awakening and subsequent advances in mission were fuelled by concerts of prayer in the sending countries (1975:126). Missions work ignited and spread with supernatural force and speed.

Furthermore, it appears as though three dynamic tensions concerning conventional missiological practice and research explain why modern missiological practice does not embrace strategic intercessory prayer as the primary tool for gospel penetration. These dynamic tensions are as follows:

2.1 The dynamic tension between implementing good and necessary practices arising from the study of missiology compared to the phenomenological aspect of prayer.

Stetzer (2014) defined missiology in its essence as a multidisciplinary study that incorporates theology, anthropology/sociology and ecclesiology. Theology is the foundation of missiology, to which the study of culture (social sciences) and missionary strategy is added (Missiology, 2014).

However, missionary statesman George Peters warned that we have become so preoccupied with technology and methodology that we have forgotten that the releasing of divine dynamics is ultimately what missions is about (cited by David Bryant, 1987:118) The noted Latin missiologist Samuel Escobar echoed this sentiment and warned against the mere accumulation of human and technical resources: flatly stating that it will not work (Escobar, 2003:26). Samuel Mateer (1997:204-207) spoke of the inevitable pull to focus more on missions' plans and methodology than on prayer patterned after Jesus. Robb warned of today's 'hyperactive missions leaders' who have little time to pray and treat it as a 'harmless pastime, rather than a strategic weapon' (Robb, 1991:23). Although insights from sociology, anthropology, contextualization, linguistics, missions' theory, church planting and growth are valid, needed and wholeheartedly embraced, they greatly overshadow intercessory prayer as the primary tool for gospel penetration.

It would seem that overly simplistic and guilt-inducing approaches related to intercessory prayer for missions from both past and present have contributed to this imbalance. Some intercessory prayer proponents have not differentiated between how mission has been incarnated in the past and what new expressions and structures might be created in the future. However, in spite of these factors, it appears that conservative evangelical missiology clearly has lost focus on prayer as the primary tool for missions' advancement.

Conversely, some mission workers may appear to justify themselves by "praying" while the empirical analysis of progress is wanting. This is very much a "truth in tension" as it is difficult to validate and measure 'prayer' work. It is easier to measure the number of missionaries, church plants, conversions and baptisms. In some cultures resistant to the gospel, metrics have changed to proxies as indicators of growth (Rickett & Morrison, 2009:358-363).

Rondal Smith (1995:122) noted that, in order to reach unreached people groups, strategic intercessory prayer is needed to impact 'institutional unbelief' and behaviour in culture. While there has been a marked increase in the focus on praying for unreached people groups - popularized by various ministries such as Operation World (Mandrake, 2010) and the Joshua Project (joshuaproject.net) - there appears to be little connection between these groups' 'prayer work' and missiological best practices such as contextualized church planting and subsequent church multiplication. It appears that there are few working models which involve strategic intercessory prayer as a primary tool for seeing the gospel penetrate an unreached people group and then continue through the initial stages to seeing churches planted and thriving.

2.2 The dynamic tension between the western approaches to missiology compared to those from the 'east/south'.

It is generally agreed that the locus of Christian influence and activity is rapidly shifting from the west to the south and east, with the latter tending to encompass a worldview that embraces prayer dynamics much more than the former. For example, while discussing various tensions and techniques concerning strategic intercession and spiritual warfare, the Lausanne Consultation Statement noted this divide '*with interest*' (Lausanne, 2000;par.3). It observed that western contributors had a worldview and missiology that *only* embraced the realities of the spiritual world *after* cross cultural experiences; whilst the "two-thirds world" participants recounted the westerner's *inability* to minister in the "east" with the 'day-to-day' realities of the spirit world (Lausanne, 2000;par.3). Similarly, in analysing the last ten years of missiology doctorates, Priest and De George noted a definite 'pro-Europe' bias (2013:200). Ed Murphy noted that western theology has been influenced greatly by the western worldview. He summarized it with the word '**naturalism**': seeing the world as a uniform system excluding any dimensions of reality that exclude the natural (Murphy, 1993:164). Jehu Hancilles (2014:130) observed that western missiology has had a clear bias – including an immense attraction to cultural anthropology studies - and suggested that more studies of the sociology of religion would be helpful.

The general result of this divide would appear to be a more rationalistic and 'pragmatic' approach to missions emanating from the west, largely leaving out the focus of strategic intercessory prayer. This was not always so, as evidenced by Jonathan Edwards' firm belief in the 'concert of prayer' as the key element in divine blessing and the primary motivation behind his famous 'humble attempt' treatise in 1748 to unite believers in prayer for the outpouring of God's Spirit (cited by Haykin, 2005:141).

2.3 The dynamic tension that exists between approaches to strategic intercessory prayer.

Relatively newer missions' advancement approaches encompassing strategic intercessory prayer, such as spiritual mapping and warfare techniques, have often appeared to be controversial, divisive and a major departure from the past. Why is this so?

The Lausanne strategy related to spiritual warfare reported tension in determining whether there was Biblical basis for such approaches and recommended exercising caution with terminology and in employing them (Lausanne, 2000:par. 29-38). A. Scott Moreau, while acknowledging several points of appreciation with these approaches, cautioned that, fundamentally, their strategy is stretching Scriptural accounts (Moreau, 2001:60). Erwin van der Meer (2010:160, 166) observed that, in spite of the Lausanne warnings against preoccupation with the demonic, this preoccupation has spread significantly in South America and Africa, labelling strategic level warfare a missions' 'quick fix' for obstacles in evangelism. Conservative evangelical missions have tended to distance themselves from these approaches. John Piper (1992) asserted that, while acknowledging the Biblical realities of 'principalities and powers' and their role in blocking gospel penetration, to focus on them is extra– Biblical.

Underscoring the divide related to theological approach, Thomas Oduro, president of the flagship Good News Theological Seminary for the African Independent Churches (AIC), stated that they do not depend on statistics to determine where they evangelize, but rather they rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance through prayer (Oduro, 2014:86-89). Meanwhile, Charles Kraft is an example of a missiologist who is a proponent of spiritual mapping (Kraft, 2006:254). Ed Silvoso in Argentina used a hybrid model of spiritual mapping for strategic intercessory prayer and then evangelism for significant church health and conversion in Argentina (1994:265-268). Rankin and Stetzer (2010:63-67) sought to bridge the divide by adhering to the literal Biblical worldview concerning Satan's strategies while being methodologically conservative in advancing missions.

John Calvin, citing Augustine, noted, "We do not know whom God has elected nor where his elect dwell" (Calvin, III, 1960:23:14). Calvin added that we can pray to assist them (non-believers) in a general fashion "no matter how great the divide that separates us" (Calvin, III, 1960:20:40). Donald Bosch in his landmark treatise *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* did not mention prayer as a factor or strategy, nor is any facet of it included in the index of subjects (Bosch, 1998:574). Andrew Murray acknowledged that, in his day, great revivals were linked to systematic, believing prayer (Murray, 1998:556).

In summary, this dynamic tension appears to reflect divergent perspectives or views on Scripture, worldviews and theological approaches. This begs the following questions:

- Can a practical model of strategic intercessory prayer be developed that is scripturally, theologically and missiologically sound in order to advance missions today?
- If so, how might that be accomplished?

In this paper, the following steps are outlined to seek to accomplish that aim:

- **3.1.** Research the Biblical and theological material concerning intercessory prayer from the Old Testament intercessors and the foundation of the Missio Trinitatis Dei to the advancement of the Church fulfilling the Great Commission.
- **3.2.** Research church and missions history, including missiology, social sciences, emerging church plants and national church sending groups to determine both effective historical and contemporary models.
- **3.3.** Research strategic intercessory prayer with experts through questionnaires and interviews.
- **3.4.** From the Basis and Meta Theoretical research (including information gleaned from experts), develop a model of strategic intercessory prayer that incorporates the principles of Scripture and the best practises of practitioners (both historical and present day).
- 4. Synopsis of Research Steps:

4.1. Basis Theoretical

• Can a model be developed for strategic mission advancement that theologically encompasses the example of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, as well as the practice, teachings and promises of Jesus - both pre and post resurrection - and includes the teaching and practice of the early church?

The Old Testament

The Old Testament intercessors laid the foundation for a unique interplay between God and His servants. For example, the study of Abraham raises several questions about mission advancement. How important is the self-disclosure of God to the intercessor for modern day mission advancement? How does one know when to accept a situation such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and when to pray for it to be changed? When do we come to the place where, as Abraham did, he backed off in his asking? When we read in Amos 3:11 that "God does nothing without revealing his plans to his prophets" (Bible, 1984), does this have application for today? Kenneth Matthews pointed out that

Abraham rested his arguments on the twin pillars of divine justice and divine mercy (2005:229). Is this a pattern we should follow today?

The audacity of Moses in interceding for God not to destroy His people after the golden calf incident is without precedent. The Reformer Ambrose noted that the "greater the sin, the more worthy must be the prayers that are sought" (Lienhard, 2001:145). Is this a guide for those praying for God's people today before mission advancement can occur?

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer noted that the watchman in Isaiah 60-62 is complementary to a mediator/intercessor whom God is seeking to 'stand in the gap' and avert God's anger (Tiemeyer, 2005:378). Is the Old Testament watchman/intercessor a prototype for the modern day intercessor?

4.2 The New Testament, Jesus and The Early Church

In the New Testament, the prayers and practices of Jesus seemingly point to Him as a model intercessor. He prayed for mission advancement related issues before preaching and choosing future leaders, in determining the will of the Father, for ministry direction and in combating temptation. A most significant example of intercessory prayer occurred in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:36-46 (Bible, 1984). Key additional passages include John 5:19-20, John 15:7, John 17 and Luke 11:5–13 (Bible, 1984).

Andrew McGowan pointed out the difference between the Ascended Christ interceding for us at the right hand of the Father compared to the Holy Spirit interceding (McGowan, 2007:53). John 16:6-11 (Bible, 1984) recorded Jesus instructing that the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness and judgment to come. This has significant impact for mission advancement, but little connection with western missiology. Additionally, the Great Commission – the "Magna Carta" of missions – was issued post resurrection in Acts 1:8 (Bible, 1984) along with the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit to help the believers be His 'witnesses'.

In the Apostle Paul's intercessory prayer to the Ephesian believers in Ephesians 3:14-19 (Bible, 1984), he prayed to the Father so that the empowerment of the Spirit might result in Christ making his home in the Ephesians' hearts and in them experiencing His love. *Can a model of strategic intercessory prayer be developed that encompasses the foundation of "Missio Trinitatis Deo"? Also, in the*

same way that the Trinity is a complex adaptive system, can an understanding of intercessory prayer include the interplay of various spiritual structures, relationships and conditions?

The Acts of the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament highlight the early church's emphasis on intercessory prayer related to mission. These include the birth of the church at Pentecost, the priority of prayer ministry found in Acts 6:1-6 (Bible, 1994) and a strategic evangelistic ministry direction for Paul and Barnabas through the sending and commissioning by the church in Antioch as found in Acts 13 (Bible, 1984). The Acts of the Apostles is the application of the teachings of Jesus on prayer and related themes.

Other pivotal New Testament passages that focus on strategic intercessory prayer for missions' advancement include 1 John 3:20-21 and 1 John 5:14-15 (Bible, 1984).

5. Meta Theoretical Material

Missiology is a multi-disciplinary approach incorporating insights from various fields. The following models will be researched and evaluated for effectiveness: Moravian, Revival, Chinese, European, Korean, South American and Historical. Emerging national sending churches and church planting movements will be examined as well. Additionally, current scholarship from social sciences on the effects of intercessory prayer will be analysed, including previous dissertations related to the subject and results received from the questionnaire and interviews.

The study of the Meta theoretical material will seek to answer several questions:

- Is there a relationship between intercessory prayer and the sending of missionaries?
- Can intercessory prayer directly or indirectly be an influence on education as well as for proclaiming the Gospel?
- Does the missiological analysis of the explosive growth of the Chinese church reflect the DNA of the early mission leaders?
- Can intercessory prayer make a difference in social causes and threats to National Security and Politics?
- Can it be said that the growth of the South Korean church can be traced (directly or indirectly) by the principles of strategic intercessory prayer?
- Can insights be gained from the approaches of those using spiritual mapping techniques?

- Is the prevailing historic model of strategic intercessory prayer for the advancement of missions effective and sustainable?
- What intercessory prayer practices and patterns related to the calling, sending and sustaining of missionaries can be gleaned from 'younger' churches such as COMIBAM and ALTECO from Latin America?
- What principles related to intercessory prayer have proven effective in recent church planting movements as reported in emerging literature and eye witness accounts?
- What cautions about 'over-promising' as well as encouragements can we learn about the efficacy of intercessory prayer as studied by various social and medical sciences?

6. Researching through the Delphi Method

According to Skulmolski, Hartman and Krahn, the Delphi method is an iterative process used to collect and distil the judgement of experts (2006:1-3). Using a series of iterative questionnaires which are tabulated, common answers are highlighted and then sent back for the refinement of thinking. This primarily qualitative research technique is appropriate for a phenomenological based subject such as intercessory prayer. The strengths of this approach are that it maintains the anonymity of respondents, pursues refinement with iterations, favours controlled feedback without group dynamic or dominant individual pressure and offers the statistical aggregation of group responses (particularly descriptive statistics using comparison and correlation analysis).

A further breakdown of the process includes:

- 6.1 Presenting a problem or hypothesis
- 6.2 Using mixed method research (Creswell, cited in Osmer, 2008:40)
- 6.3 Designing semi-structured interview questions to examine the knowledge base, beliefs/perceptions, behaviours and attributes (Barriball & White, 1994:328-235)
- 6.4 Focusing on four phases of strategic intercessory prayer: asking, growth, blockages and timing
- 6.5 Targeting four different categories of experts:
 - o Mission leaders
 - o Missionaries
 - o Intercessors
 - Vocational Christian leaders (pastors, theologians, para-church)

- 6.6 Conducting pretesting to refine the questionnaire (subsequent refinement)
- 6.7 Collecting data, conducting transcription, analysing the material and running iterations
- 6.8 Summarizing and analysing the data

7. The Praxis Theoretical Material: The Model that Emerges

The model will seek to answer the question: is it possible to take a seemingly subjective experience such as strategic intercessory prayer and deconstruct it into its various parts? How does one know that their prayer has been 'heard'? How can one know (as per the claims of Scripture) that a person can have confidence that a prayer is answered before it actually is? Is it possible to judge the progress of a prayer? Can spiritual tools be used to expedite the answer to a prayer within the scope of God's sovereignty? Are there best practises related to intercessory prayer that seemingly could bridge the gap between different understandings of Scripture? A hypothesis will be developed in addition to a corresponding framework model that can potentially be replicated.

8. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to support the statement that "It appears that conventional missiology and practice in conservative evangelical circles does not focus on or implement strategic intercessory prayer as the primary tool for gospel penetration". I have additionally sought to provide steps in researching a model of strategic intercessory prayer that potentially could incorporate a Biblical, historical and missiological foundation. While it would appear the combination of God's sovereignty, God's timing and human participation often accomplishes His purposes for mission advancement; ultimately, God is not limited to any method or means.

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