

A Brief History of 24/7 Prayer

The Tabernacle of David

King David was a man of “one thing” (Psalm 27:4). Around 1000 BC, as an outflow of his heart, he commanded that the Ark of the Covenant be brought up on the shoulders of the Levites amidst the sound of songs and musical instruments to his new capital, Jerusalem. There he had it placed in a tent and appointed two hundred and eighty-eight prophetic singers and four thousand musicians to minister before the Lord, “to make petition, to give thanks and to praise the Lord” day and night (1 Chronicles 15:1–17:27). This was unlike anything that had been done in Israel’s history, but it was God’s plan for Israel.

The Davidic Order of Worship

Although the tabernacle was replaced by a temple, the Davidic order of worship was embraced and reinstated by seven subsequent leaders in the history of Israel and Judah. Each time this order of worship was reintroduced, spiritual breakthrough, deliverance and military victory followed.

- Solomon instructed that worship in the temple should be in accordance with the Davidic order (2 Chronicles 8:14–15).
- Jehoshaphat defeated Moab and Ammon by setting singers up in accordance with the Davidic order: singers at the front of the army singing the Great Hallel. Jehoshaphat reinstated Davidic worship in the temple (2 Chronicles 20:20–22, 28).
- Joash (2 Chronicles 23:1–24:27).
- Hezekiah cleansed and reconsecrated the temple, and reinstated the Davidic order of worship (2 Chronicles 29:1–36, 30:21).
- Josiah reinstated Davidic worship (2 Chronicles 35:1–27).
- Ezra and Nehemiah, returning from Babylon, reinstated Davidic worship (Ezra 3:10, Nehemiah 12:28–47).

Historians have also speculated that around the time of Jesus, in their search to find communion with God, the Essenes of the Judean wilderness reinstated Davidic worship as part of their life of prayer and fasting.

The Early Monastic Tradition of 24/7 Prayer

For over one thousand years monasticism (the practice of taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to one’s spiritual superior) held a key role in the development of theology and practice in the Church. From the fourth and fifth centuries, monks and nuns were an accepted part of society. Monasticism was the cradle in which *laus perennis*, perpetual prayer, was birthed in the church age. Some of the key figures from this tradition are:

Alexander Akimetes and the Sleepless Ones

Born in Asia Minor and educated in Constantinople, Alexander became an officer in the Roman army. Challenged by Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler from Matthew 19:21, Akimetes sold his possessions and retreated from court life to the desert. Tradition states that he set fire to a pagan temple after seven years of solitude. Upon arrest and

imprisonment Alexander converted the prison governor and his household, and promptly returned to his abode in the desert. Shortly thereafter he had the misfortune to fall in with a group of robbers. His evangelistic zeal, however, could not be contained and he converted these outcasts into devoted followers of Jesus. This group became the core of his band of monks.

Around 400 AD, he returned to Constantinople with 300–400 monks, where he established *laus perennis* to fulfill Paul's exhortation to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Driven from Constantinople, the monks established the monastery at Gormon, at the mouth of the Black Sea. This became the founding monastery of the order of the Acoemetae (literally, the sleepless ones). Alexander died here in 430 AD, but the influence of the Acoemetae continued. The houses were divided into six choirs rotating throughout the day, each new choir relieving the one before, to create uninterrupted prayer and worship twenty-four hours a day.

John, the second abbot of the Acoemetae, founded another monastery on the eastern shore of the Bosphorus, referred to in many ancient documents as the "great monastery" and motherhouse of the Acoemetae. The library here was recognized for its greatness throughout the Byzantine Empire and indeed was consulted by several Popes. The third abbot established a monastery in the capital under the royal consul, Studius, who dedicated the new monastery to John the Baptist. Studion became a renowned center of learning and piety, the most important monastery in Constantinople. Studion continued until 1453 when the Turks captured Constantinople.

The lasting impact of the Acoematae has been their worship and their contribution to church liturgy. The monasteries, numbering into the hundreds and sometimes thousands, were organized into national groups of Latins, Greeks, Syrians and Egyptians, and then into choirs. In addition to *laus perennis*, which passed into the Western Church with St. Maurice of Agaune, they developed the divine office of the literal carrying out of Psalm 119:164, "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments." This became an integral part of the Benedictine rule of the seven hours of prayer—Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline.

Agaunum

Around 522 AD, Abbot Ambrosius brought attention to a small monastery founded in Switzerland. Legend has it that around 286 AD, a Theban Legion under the command of Maurice de Valois was sent to suppress a rebellion by Gauls in the north of the empire. On their way to Gaul, the Coptic Christians were encamped at Agaunum (present day Switzerland) where they were ordered to sacrifice to Roman gods and to the Emperor in petition for victory. Maurice and his Theban Legion refused. The Roman Emperor, Maximian, ordered a "decimation" of the legion of seven thousand: one in every ten men was killed. When Maurice and his men continued their refusal, a second decimation was ordered, followed by another and another. The entire seven thousand Egyptian Christians were eventually martyred.

Although the veracity of the story has been called into question, the legend of the martyrs at Agaunum spread far and wide. Between 515–521 AD, Sigismund, King of Burgundy, lavishly endowed the monastery established at the site of the martyrdom to ensure its success. In 522 AD, the abbot at St. Maurice's instituted *laus perennis* after the tradition of the Acoemetae. Choirs of monks would sing in rotation, with one choir relieving the previous choir, continuing day and night. This practice went on until around 900 AD, impacting monasteries all over France and Switzerland.

Comgall and Bangor

The Mappa Mundi, the most celebrated of all medieval maps, contains reference to a place on the edge of the known world: Bangor, Ireland. Why was this small, out of the way place, now a dormant coastal town fifteen miles from Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, so important in medieval times?

St Patrick and Vallis Angelorum

Monasticism in Britain and Ireland developed along similar lines to those of the Desert Fathers of the East. St. Patrick's mother was a close relative of Martin of Tours, a contemporary of St. Antony, the father of monasticism. It is no surprise that the same type of asceticism which accompanied the monastic lifestyle in Egypt was also found in Ireland.

In 433 AD, just as the Roman Empire was starting to crumble, St. Patrick returned to Ireland (having been enslaved on the island previously) with a view to preaching the Christian message to the Irish. He was followed by a number of other ascetics—Finnian, Brigid and Ciaran, all of whom established monastic centers throughout the island. While Christianity in much of the empire had been founded upon bishops overseeing cities and urban centers, Ireland had never been conquered and had no urban centers. The fall of the empire therefore had little impact on it, making it relatively easy for monasteries to become the center of influence in Irish society.

According to the 12th century Anglo-Norman Monk Jocelin, Patrick came to rest in a valley on the shores of the Belfast Lough on one of his many journeys. Here, he and his comrades beheld a vision of heaven. Jocelin states, "they held the valley filled with heavenly light, and with a multitude of heaven, they heard, as chanted forth from the voice of angels, the psalmody of the celestial choir." The place became known as the Vallis Angelorum or the Vale of Angels. The famed Bangor Monastery would begin its life here approximately one hundred years later; from this spot, heaven's song would reach into Europe.

Introducing Comgall

Bangor's founder, Comgall, was born in Antrim in 517 AD. Originally a soldier, he soon took monastic vows and was educated for his new life. He is next seen in the Irish annals as a hermit on Lough Erne. However, his rule was so severe that seven of his fellow monks died and he was persuaded to leave and establish a house at Bangor (or Beannchar, from the Irish Horned Curve, probably in reference to the bay) in the famed Vale of the Angels. The earliest Irish annals give 558 as the date of Bangor's commencement.

Bangor Mor and Perpetual Psalmody

At Bangor, Comgall instituted a rigid monastic rule of incessant prayer and fasting. Far from turning people away, this ascetic rule attracted thousands. When Comgall died in 602, the annals report that three thousand monks looked to him for guidance. Bangor Mor, named "the great Bangor" to distinguish it from its British contemporaries, became the greatest monastic school in Ulster as well as one of the three leading lights of Celtic Christianity. The others were Iona, the great missionary center founded by Colomba, and Bangor on the Dee, in Wales, founded by Dinooth; the ancient Welsh Triads also confirm the "Perpetual Harmonies" at this great house.

Throughout the sixth century, Bangor became famous for its choral psalmody. “It was this music which was carried to the Continent by the Bangor Missionaries in the following century” (Hamilton, Rector of Bangor Abbey). Divine services of the seven hours of prayer were carried out throughout Bangor’s existence. However the monks went further and carried out the practice of *laus perennis*. In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of Comgall and Bangor, stating, “the solemnization of divine offices was kept up by companies, who relieved each other in succession, so that not for one moment day and night was there an intermission of their devotions.” This continuous singing was antiphonal in nature, based on the call and response reminiscent of Patrick’s vision, but also practiced by St. Martin’s houses in Gaul. Many of these psalms and hymns were later written down in the Antiphony of Bangor which came to reside in Columbanus’ monastery at Bobbio, Italy.

The Bangor Missionaries

The ascetic life of prayer and fasting was the attraction of Bangor. However, as time progressed, Bangor also became a famed seat of learning and education. There was a saying in Europe at the time that if a man knew Greek he was bound to be an Irishman, largely due to the influence of Bangor. The monastery further became a missions-sending community. Even to this day missionary societies are based in the town. Bangor monks appear throughout medieval literature as a force for good.

In 580 AD, a Bangor monk named Mirin took Christianity to Paisley, where he died “full of miracles and holiness.” In 590, the fiery Columbanus, one of Comgall’s leaders, set out from Bangor with twelve other brothers, including Gall who planted monasteries throughout Switzerland. In Burgundy he established a severe monastic rule at Luxeil which mirrored that of Bangor. From there he went to Bobbio in Italy and established the house which became one of the largest and finest monasteries in Europe. Columbanus died in 615, but by 700 AD, one hundred additional monasteries had been planted throughout France, Germany and Switzerland. Other famed missionary monks who went out from Bangor include Molua, Findchua and Luanus.

The End of Greatness

The greatness of Bangor came to a close in 824 with raids from the marauding Vikings; in one raid alone, nine hundred monks were slaughtered. Although the twelfth century saw a resurrection of the fire of Comgall initiated by Malachy (a close friend of Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote *The Life of St. Malachy*), it unfortunately never had the same impact as the early Celtic firebrands who held back the tide of darkness and societal collapse by bringing God to a broken generation.

Cluny

In the ninth and tenth century, Viking raiders and settlers were forging a violent new way of life in Europe. Feudalism was taking root and the monastic way of life was shaken—not only by the physical attacks as Bangor experienced, but subsequent to the raids, many houses were subject to the whims of local chieftains. In reaction to this movement, reform came about in several ways, one arguably being the most crucial reforming movement in the Western Church: the Cluniac order.

In 910, William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine, founded the monastery at Cluny under the auspices of Abbot Berno, instituting a stricter form of the Benedictine rule. William endowed the abbey with resources from his entire domain, but more importantly gave the abbey freedom in two regards. Due to the financial endowment, the abbey was committed to increased prayer and perpetual praise, or *laus perennis*. Its autonomy from secular leadership was also important as the abbey was directly accountable to the church in Rome.

The second abbot, Odo, took over in 926. According to C.H. Lawrence, he was “a living embodiment of the Benedictine ideal.” His reforming zeal meant that the influence of the monastery at Cluny expanded widely during his leadership. Known for its independence, hospitality and alms giving, Cluny significantly departed from the Benedictine rule, removing manual labor from a monk’s day and replacing it with increased prayer. The number of monastic houses which looked to Cluny as their motherhouse increased greatly during this period, and the influence of the house spread all over Europe.

Cluny reached the zenith of its power and influence in the twelfth century; it commanded 314 monasteries all over Europe, second only to Rome in terms of importance in the Christian world. It became a seat of learning, training no less than four popes. The fast-growing community at Cluny necessitated a great need for buildings. In 1089, the abbey at Cluny began construction under Hugh, the sixth abbot. It was finished by 1132 and was considered to be one of the wonders of the Middle Ages. More than 555 feet in length, it was the largest building in Europe until St. Peter’s Basilica was built in Rome during the sixteenth century. Consisting of five naves, a narthex (or ante-church), several towers and the conventual buildings, it covered an area of twenty-five acres. However, even before these great building projects, it is interesting to note that the decline in spirituality led to the ultimate demise of Cluny’s influence.

Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians

Zinzendorf’s Early Years

The Reformation of the sixteenth century saw much-needed reform enter the European Church, which also caused the closing of many monasteries that had become spiritually dead. The next great champion of 24/7 prayer would not appear until the start of the eighteenth century—Count Nicholas Ludwig Von Zinzendorf.

Zinzendorf was born in 1700 to an aristocratic but pious family. His father died when he was only six weeks old. The young boy was therefore brought up by his grandmother, a well-known leader of the Pietist movement and friendly with the established leader of the Pietists and young Zinzendorf’s godfather, Phillip Spener. Growing up in the midst of such passion for Jesus, Zinzendorf speaks of his early childhood as a time of great piety: “In my fourth year I began to seek God earnestly, and determined to become a true servant of Jesus Christ.”

From the age of ten, Zinzendorf was tutored at the Pietist school of Halle under the watchful eye of Augustus Francke, another leader of the Pietists. There he formed a school club which lasted all his life, The Honourable Order of the Mustard Seed. After several years at Halle, Zinzendorf’s uncle considered the young count too much of a Pietist and had him sent to Wittenberg to learn jurisprudence, so that he might be prepared for court life. Soon the young count was accepted in various circles of society in Europe. He kept these connections for the rest of his life,

although his position in the Dresden Court and future plans for Saxon court life as Secretary of State would not be fulfilled.

The Moravians and Herrnhut

In 1722, Zinzendorf bought the Berthelsdorf estate from his grandmother and installed a Pietist preacher in the local Lutheran church. That same year Zinzendorf came into contact with a Moravian preacher, Christian David, who persuaded the young count of the sufferings of the persecuted Protestants in Moravia. These Moravians known as the *Unitas Fratrum* were the remains of John Huss' followers in Bohemia. Since the 1600s, these saints had suffered under the hands of successive repressive Catholic monarchs. Zinzendorf offered them asylum on his lands. Christian David returned to Bohemia and brought many to settle on Zinzendorf's estate, forming the community of Herrnhut, The Watch of the Lord. The community quickly grew to around three hundred, yet, due to divisions and tension in the infant community, Zinzendorf gave up his court position and became the leader of the brethren, instituting a new constitution for the community.

The Hundred-Year Prayer Meeting and Subsequent Missions

A new spirituality now characterized the community, with men and women being committed to bands or choruses to encourage one another in the life of God. August of 1727 is seen as the Moravian Pentecost. Zinzendorf said August 13th was "a day of the outpourings of the Holy Spirit upon the congregation; it was its Pentecost." Within two weeks of the outpouring, twenty-four men and twenty-four women covenanted to pray "hourly intercessions," thus praying every hour around the clock. They were committed to see that, "The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out" (Leviticus 6:13). The numbers committed to this endeavor soon increased to around seventy from the community. This prayer meeting would go non-stop for the next one hundred years and is seen by many as the spiritual power behind the impact the Moravians had on the world.

From the prayer room at Herrnhut came a missionary zeal which has hardly been surpassed in church history. The spark initially came from Zinzendorf's encounter in Denmark with Eskimos who had been converted by Lutherans. The count returned to Herrnhut and conveyed his passion to see the gospel go to the nations. As a result, many of the community went out into the world to preach the gospel, some even selling themselves into slavery in order to fulfill the great commission. This commitment is shown by a simple statistic. Typically, when it comes to world missions the Protestant laity to missionary ratio has been 5000:1. The Moravians, however, saw a much increased ratio of 60:1. By 1776, some 226 missionaries had been sent out from the community at Herrnhut. It is clear through the teaching of the so-called father of modern missions, William Carey, that the Moravians had a profound impact on him in regard to their zeal for missionary activity. It is also through the missions-minded Moravians that John Wesley came to faith. The impact of this little community in Saxony, which committed to seek the face of the Lord day and night, has truly been immeasurable.

24/7 Prayer in the 20th Century

In 1973 David Yonggi Cho, Pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, established Prayer Mountain with night and day prayer. Prayer Mountain was soon attracting over a million visitors per year, as people would spend retreats in the prayer cells provided on the mountain. Cho had a commitment to continuous prayer, to

faith and to establishing small discipleship cells in his church. Perhaps as a result, Cho's church rapidly expanded to become the largest church congregation on the globe, with membership now over 780,000.

On September 19, 1999, the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, started a prayer and worship meeting that has continued for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week ever since. With a similar vision to Zinzendorf, that the fire on the altar should never go out, there has never been a time when worship and prayer has not ascended to heaven since that date.

At the same time, in many other places around the world, God placed desires and plans for 24/7 prayer in the fabric of diverse ministries and in the hearts of leaders. This has resulted in 24/7 houses of prayer and prayer mountains being established in every continent of the earth.